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To the Honorable

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"ISN'T THAT A SIGHT TO PLEASE THE EYE
OF A SPORTSMAN?"

THE MOUNTAIN BOYS SERIES

PHIL BRADLEY'S SHOOTING BOX

BY
SILAS K. BOONE



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PHIL BRADLEY'S SHOOTING BOX

CHAPTER I

THE FOUR CHUMS AFLOAT

“**W**HY did they name this launch the *Skoot*, somebody tell me?”

“Give it up, Lub.”

“That’s the puzzle we’ll never solve; because if there is one thing the old tar-box on a raft can’t do, it’s scoot.”

“Be careful how you talk disrespectfully about tar, X-Ray, because you must know that you’re away down in the Old Tar-heel State of North Carolina right now.”

“And Phil, we do make pretty fast time when the wind is chasing after us, you know.”

“Yes, and say what you will about it, this is a pretty comfy old boat, every way you take it. We’ve got her loaded down in a way something sinful, since Lub here would keep adding more and more grub to the outfit; just as if he

thought we'd starve down on Currituck Sound, where there are ducks and geese and brant galore."

"And oysters and clams and fish and diamond-back terrapin besides, don't forget to mention, Ethan."

"Well, it was the best launch I could charter that would answer our purpose," the boy called Phil continued. "You know these waters are mighty shallow, and you've got to keep that fact in mind lots of times when knocking around these bays."

There were just four of them aboard the launch which was moving carefully along close to the end of an autumn day near the shore of Currituck Sound. Night was already beginning to set in around them; they had none of them been in this region before; and Phil as the pilot of the expedition was trying to locate landmarks that he had on his chart, though there appeared to be considerable uncertainty with regard to this map being correct.

These wideawake lads lived in the town of Brewster, which, under another name is really located among the foothills of the Adirondacks in New York State. They had for some time been close chums, and for reasons of their own called themselves the Mountain Boys; possibly

because an ancestor of Ethan Allan's had once belonged to those famous Revolutionary heroes coming from the Green Mountains.

Besides Ethan there were Raymond Tyson, who usually went by the name of "X-Ray," because there were few things which he could not see through; Osmond Fenwick, the chubby fellow whom his mates called "Lub"; and the leader of the crowd, Phil Bradley.

On account of certain happenings which have been set forth at length in the preceding volumes of the Series, there would be no school for the older boys of Brewster until after the Holidays. This had allowed Phil and his chums a golden opportunity to pay a long contemplated visit to some property down on the shore of Currituck Sound which had come to Phil Bradley from a queer old recluse named Alexander Putney.

Phil was very well fixed in this world's goods, and both Lub and the Tyson boys never knew what it was to want money, being supplied with everything their folks thought might be good for their welfare.

It was a different matter with Ethan Allan. His people were not at all well off, and the boy was as "proud as Lucifer," as the others called it. He firmly declined to accept of charity,

though Phil had much more than he could ever need.

Ethan being a clever fellow had hit on a way to accumulate enough cash to pay for his share in such expenses as the club might incur during their camping trips, or little excursions, a late one having been up into the higher Adirondacks.

He roamed the whole neighborhood hunting roots that would fetch good prices in the market. In this way Ethan secured and dried many pounds of fine wild ginseng, golden rod and such other native roots as grew within ten miles of his home.

Possibly he would have made a fair amount of money by this means, as well as doing quite a little trapping in the winter; but not near enough to cover his share of the gross expenses.

That was where the other three chums entered into a dark conspiracy to delude their trusting chum. Phil recommended a certain dealer in a distant city as one who would pay the highest prices for such products as Ethan had to dispose of. In fact this imaginary dealer was an old uncle of Phil's who heartily entered into the little scheme, Phil footing the bills for all extra amounts.

Ethan often showed letters he had received from this firm, and on actual printed letterheads

too, praising him for the remarkable quality of the pelts and the dried roots which he had shipped them, and always enclosing a bountiful check in settlement.

So far Ethan never seemed to dream that he was being beautifully hoodwinked. Often when he happened to mention with pride something about his success as a root-gatherer, and express his intention of going into the business on a larger scale some day, X-Ray Tyson would have to sily kick Lub on the shins in order to remind him that it was dangerous to allow such a beaming smile to appear on his face. Once Ethan's suspicions were aroused and likely he would be very indignant because his chums had played such a game upon him, even though it had been done through sincere affection.

So now here they were nearing the region where Phil understood his "shootingbox," as he called the cabin, might be found. There was some hundred of acres of wild land in connection with the small building, and several excellent "points" from which good duck shooting might be had on certain days.

"Too bad that man who was in charge of your place ever since the death of old Mr. Putney had to go away," remarked X-Ray, as all of them strained their eyes to mark the contour of the

now dim shore line, hoping to discover the landmark which was to tell them they had arrived in the vicinity of their intended destination.

"And only two weeks ago at that," added Ethan. "He would have been a great help to us, showing us lots of things we'll now have to find out for ourselves."

"Yes," added Lub, "and he might have been an extra fine cook, too."

"Oh! listen to that, will you?" laughed X-Ray. "The rest of us don't bother our heads much about that part of the business, Lub. Do you want to know why? Because we've already decided, three against one, that you're going to be the head cook and bottle-washer on this trip. We've given you a raise from scullion."

"Yes," added Ethan, "you've been telling us so much about what you've learned from that darky cook at your house, we want you to make good."

Lub joined in the general laugh. He was an easy-going fellow, like nearly all who are of his tub-like build.

"Oh! very well," he said, sweetly; "I'll accept the appointment of Chief Cook on this expedition with thanks. And to begin with I hereby appoint you, X-Ray, to serve as scullion, while Ethan is to be my chief assistant, the one who

does all the really hard work. Leave it to me to do the bossing."

It was pretty hard to get one on Lub after all. He often seemed to be an "easy mark" and Ethan was particularly fond of "joshing" him; but it might be noticed that these things fell from Lub's thick hide like water from a duck's back. And what was best of all, they left no bitter stings behind them.

"What if we don't find the place this evening after all, Phil?" suggested X-Ray.

"Then we'll have to put in another night aboard the launch; or else if we want to we can go ashore, build a rousing camp fire, and sleep there," the other replied.

"Fine," remarked Lub, quickly; "I like that, and the sooner I get my staff started into harness the better."

"A camp will seem like old times again," spoke up X-Ray.

"We might take turns keeping watch," suggested Ethan with a sly glance toward the stout chum.

"What for?" demanded Lub, instantly. "Now you're just saying that to make me believe there may be ferocious wild beasts prowling in this Southern country, or alligators, crocodiles, and diamond-back terrapin crawling

around waiting to take a bite out of a fellow's leg. But I know better than that. I'm game to sleep ashore if the rest say the word. I defy the skeeters to carry me off."

"I should think you could," grunted Ethan, "it would require a derrick to even get you started, Lub."

"Oh! not always!" declared X-Ray; "I've seen him give a jump that an athlete would have been proud to point to. That was when a yellow-jacket stung him at the picnic. Lub had sat down on a nest of the little terrors, and they got busy right away."

"See the leaning pine tree yet, Phil?" asked Lub, outwardly unmoved, although perhaps he might secretly be chuckling a little to himself over such pleasant reminiscences in his eventful past.

"Nothing doing," came the reply from the pilot.

"I hope now we didn't pass it by without noticing the same," observed Ethan, who was a little inclined to look on the gloomy side of things, even as the stout boy usually saw the silver lining, and paid little attention to the dark cloud.

"Not one chance in ten of that," asserted X-Ray. "I've got some eyes myself, if you

want to know it; and Phil here has been examining every rod of the old shore since it began to get dusk. We have made a little miscalculation, that's all."

"None of us are going to worry ourselves sick over such a small thing," Lub up and declared. "And when you say the word, I'll start up the little stove we've got aboard, that burns gasoline, and have supper going in a jiffy; that is, unless you are bent on eating ashore."

"Don't rush the mourners so, Lub," begged X-Ray. "When the subject of eating is mentioned you always get into a fever right away, and want to be doing things. We have plenty of time before us."

"I thought I saw a sort of light then!" remarked Phil.

"It seems to flicker, as if it might be a fire, too," added Ethan, staring hard at the point ahead of them, and which they were evidently about to round.

Phil was trying the best he could to watch out for any impediment, for to smash the bow of their launch at this early stage of the trip would not be the most pleasant experience in the world.

"It must be a fire!" asserted X-Ray, positively.

"And ashore, too, of course," added Ethan.

"Oh! I guess it's some oysterman who has his camp near where he does his tonging."

"Or some market duck hunters," added Phil, who did not like the idea of having such men for near neighbors, since it would be apt to interfere with the sport of himself and friends.

"But I thought Currituck Sound was nearly all taken up with private shooting boxes like yours, Phil; or else in the possession of clubs that own or lease all the important points?" Ethan complained.

"There may be a few pot-hunters who manage to hang out; and some oyster-growers have profitable beds on the shallow bottoms near tide-water," Phil went on to say. "Now, mind, I'm only telling you what I've read, because this is my first trip down here, though this property came to me two years ago."

"Who was Alexander Putney, Phil?" asked Lub.

"An old friend of my mother's," replied the other, slowly. "Perhaps I oughtn't to mention it, and I wouldn't to any one but such good chums; but it seems he was once engaged to marry my mother, they quarreled over some silly thing, and he set out to be a woman-hater. Afterwards old Alexander repented of his fool-

ishness, and not having any heir of his own he chose to leave me all his wealth."

"And this place down here was where he lived for many years, wasn't it?" asked X-Ray Tyson, curiously, for he had never heard a story just like this; and as for Ethan, poor fellow, he must have secretly wished some almost forgotten previous lover of *his* mother would "drop off," and leave him a snug little fortune, so that he could feel independent, and not be compelled to do all that laborious root digging and fur trapping in order to keep up his end of the general club expenses.

"Yes," continued Phil, reflectively, "this was his favorite residence. He spent many years on Currituck Sound. I believe they called him an old hermit around here; but he lived in his books, shot a little game in season, tonged for oysters, and often fished for sheepshead and all the other salt water game fish they get along the coast. But he died after all up North on a visit, and was buried near Philadelphia."

"There's the fire!" cried Lub, suddenly.

"Look out, Phil; back her, or you'll smash into that anchored boat!" shouted X-Ray.

Phil had already started to do this very thing. The launch had enough headway to almost hit

the boat that lay at anchor, and indeed did glide along its side.

Immediately a heavy bull-like voice roared at them from the shore, where a man was seen shaking his fist furiously toward them.

"I got er good mind to larn ye somethin' by sendin' a charge of buckshot out thataways!" they heard him threaten belligerently.

Phil laughed softly to himself.

"Listen to that, would you?" gasped Lub, as he heard the volley of wrath wafted across the water to their ears; "and no damage done to the old cheesebox, either!"

"Nice kind of neighbor to have around!" muttered X-Ray.

CHAPTER II

AN UNEXPECTED DISCOVERY

“MY stars! but wasn’t he just as mad as a hornet, though?” Lub remarked, after they had once more started on their way, with Phil again looking for the expected leaning pine that would give him his bearings.

“Say, Phil, it couldn’t be possible now that was your place, and some measly squatter had taken possession?” suggested Ethan.

“There was some sort of shack back of the fire,” admitted X-Ray, who had keener eyes than any of the rest.

“It couldn’t have been my place,” Phil assured them, “because all the conditions are different. I’m only hoping we won’t be too near that fiery old fellow. I should think he’d be a bad one to tackle in a row.”

“And mark my words, we’re just bound to knock up against him lots of times while we’re down here,” hinted Ethan. “If we start for a point we’ll be just in time to see him rise up, and warn us away. No matter if it does belong to you, Phil, possession of a blind is nine points

of the law with some of these cracker natives."

"Don't borrow all sorts of trouble, Ethan," begged Lub. "We'll get along somehow with the neighbors, and the natives. Kindness will do the trick where all the threatening wouldn't faize them a bit."

"Yes, and when it comes to soft-soaping you're the king pin, Lub. I'd like to see the man, Tarheel or cracker, who could resist that smile of yours long."

"Thank you, X-Ray, it's kind of you to say such nice things," Lub remarked; "but you all remember the story of the fierce wind and the sun quarreling as to which was the stronger, so they decided to try it out on a traveler."

"Yes," laughed X-Ray, "the wind tore around him and tried to get his cloak off, but he wrapped it closer around him. Then the sun started in and made it so warm the pilgrim was only too glad to throw his cloak aside. That's the way Lub figures soft words carry more weight than hard ones. Mebbe they do. They prevent lots of scraps, I'll allow."

"Some of the rest of you perhaps didn't notice all I did," interrupted X-Ray.

"Yes, I did see that young woman in the background, if that's what you mean!" declared Ethan.

"She seemed like a pretty good-looker, too," the Tyson boy continued, "while the old man was a regular tearer. If the girl is his daughter she doesn't follow after her dad's family."

"There was a yellow dog barking at us, too," Ethan added, as if to prove that he had used his eyes to some advantage while they were passing the little bayou, at the head of which the fire had been burning.

"Wind's rising more and more, fellows," commented Phil, as he heard the little wavelets slapping up against the starboard side of the launch, coming from the northwest; "and I reckon it'll be some cold to-night."

"Then," said Lub, "let's hope we come on the place, because it gets awful creepy sleeping in a boat when the wind's howling, and the spray flying all around."

"Oh! we had fixed it to go ashore and make a camp, you forget, Lub?" Ethan told him. "If there are plenty of rushes around, we could even make a windbreak, if not a hunter's shelter tent or wick-e-up."

"There's that fish we caught when trolling to-day, and that we said we'd cook for supper," the stout boy mused; "I got it fixed, all right, and rubbed in cracker crumbs, and fried in some hot grease from melted salt pork it's going to

strike me in about the right spot. Phil, don't you think it's a waste of time to keep on looking for your place, now it's getting so dark?"

"We'll cruise on a little further, Lub," he was told. "It can't get pitch dark, you know, because there's a moon back of those clouds."

"Seem to be a good many ducks down here already, though they told us it was pretty early in the season for the best shooting," Ethan mentioned.

"It's an unusually cold fall," Phil explained, "and that's hurried them down from the North. You know the best ducks, canvasbacks and red-heads, never stop on the way here. You seldom get one of them on the Long Island shore, or even down along New Jersey."

"But what makes them like Chesapeake Bay in parts, and this region down here?" inquired Lub, who really knew very little about the habits of game, though when it came to settling on which species of duck tasted the best he could be depended on to make a wise decision.

Ethan, who was himself a great hunter, took that question as directed at him.

"Why," he replied, quickly, "don't you know those two species are what they call deep-water feeders. Other ducks frequent the shallows where they feed on eel grass and such things.

In the South, winter times, the same ducks live on small fish, and get so rank that people have to actually skin them so as to be rid of the fishy flavor."

"But what do the canvasbacks and redheads eat?" continued Lub.

"Mostly wild celery as it's called," Ethan told him. "It grows in deep water, and most ducks are unable to dive far enough to get it. That's why those high priced ducks have such a fine flavor, they say."

"Huh! me for the canvasback then!" declared Lub, vigorously, smacking his lips in anticipation of a feast, for if there was one thing he had as yet never had enough of it was ducklings.

Phil kept the launch moving quietly along, and not far away from the shore. As a rule this stood out blankly, for it was low, and covered with reeds, though in places trees abounded. Doubtless there were spots where marshes could be found, and in which the ducks loved to spend parts of each long sunny day feeding, flying out to deep water for protection at night time, since there would always be more or less danger to them from prowling foxes, mink, muskrats and such animals as would be glad of a game supper.

"We've heard some little shooting as we came

along," Ethan went on to say, as he lounged there at his ease, watching the shore line moving past; "but most of the city club members haven't shown up yet, I should think."

"The ducks and brant are coming in heavy enough," X-Ray added, "for a dozen times we sighted big flocks."

"I've learned to tell the geese and brant from the ducks ever so far away," announced Lub, proudly, at which Ethan snorted, and then chuckled.

"Smart boy, Lub," he said, derisively, "seeing that the geese always fly in a V-shaped flock, with an old gander at the point as leader, while ducks keep along any old way. There are baymen who claim to be able to tell every species of duck just by the way they fly, though I don't believe more'n half of that yarn, do you, Phil?"

"Well, some of these old natives are wonderfully keen," the pilot answered back, "and it wouldn't surprise me if they were able to tell nine times out of ten what kind of ducks they were, no matter how far away the flying flock happened to be."

"You talk as if only one kind of duck made a flock," remarked the puzzled Lub. "Don't the various species mix any?"

"Never for breeding, like always hunting up

like," Phil replied. "Sometimes you'll see some broadbills feeding, and a bunch of teal may drop down near them. But scare them up, and each kind will fly away by itself."

"My! but those things are interesting," the fat boy continued.

"Oh! we'll have you a full-fledged sportsman before we're done with it, Lub," jeered Ethan.

"You've got the sharpest eyes, X-Ray," said Phil just then; "so oblige me by taking a look over there, and tell me if that doesn't seem to be a bent pine on some sort of a point."

All of them immediately focussed their eyes on the spot pointed out, and presently X-Ray made reply.

"That's what she is, Phil, bet your boots on it!" he exclaimed, enthusiastically.

"Hurrah!" Lub made out to say in a faint cheer.

"We're nearing home, sweet home!" sang out Ethan.

"I hope none of you're going to be disappointed with things," Phil thought fit to say just then; "because of course I don't know in what sort of state that man Fitts left things. If he was like the average cracker down here we'll have the time of our lives cleaning up."

"But you never can tell, Phil," Ethan re-

marked consolingly. "Now and then you run across a man who's neater than most house-keepers, and must tidy up things just so. I've met that kind. They're too fussy to live with, but it's nice to come into possession after one has been ahead of you."

They were now near enough to the point to make it clear that the tree was really a crooked one, and also that it was a pine.

"For the sake of location let's name this Crooked Pine Point," suggested X-Ray Tyson, who was great on giving everything some sort of name by which it might ever afterwards be known and recognized.

"Phil, you've got your bearings down pat, of course, and know how to steer so as to avoid any shallow water over a bar, and get in your cove?" Ethan inquired, although he knew the pilot too well to believe Phil would be anything else but careful how he proceeded.

"I certainly have," came the steady reply, as Phil began to shift the wheel and change the course of the slowly advancing launch.

X-Ray Tyson went to the extreme bow so as to be in position to "fend off" when they came close to the shore, in case Phil managed to avoid the shoals. There was plenty of water in the cove if only one took the proper course.

"Steady, Phil," X-Ray said, "a little bit to the right,—now, port some, and then keep on dead ahead. There are stakes showing the channel, just as you said it would be. Now, I can see what looks like a dock ahead of us."

"Yes, there is a dock, all built by Mr. Putney himself," admitted Phil. "He liked to spend his time that way; and unless Fitts disturbed things dreadfully we'll be apt to find a neat box here."

"Hello!"

"What's the matter, X-Ray, and why do you say that?" demanded Lub, suspiciously.

"Looks something like a boat!" came the answer.

"A boat in here at my dock, do you mean?" asked Phil.

"It certainly is, for I can see it plainly now," the other announced.

"Anything like the ramshackle old tub that man had anchored out back where we slammed into it?" demanded Ethan.

"Oh! this is only a kind of rowboat, I guess," the lookout announced.

"Deserted, X-Ray?" asked Phil.

"I don't see any sign of life about it," admitted the boy, crouching in the bow of the still slowly advancing launch.

Phil had shut off the power entirely, for he fancied they had headway enough to carry them through; if not there was the always handy push-pole, and willing arms close by to use it.

He swung the launch around so that they might come to the dock just beyond where the mysterious rowboat was bobbing on the little wavelets that came in from the wide bay.

At the right time X-Ray Tyson fended off, and then nimbly jumped ashore holding the cable in his hand. He evidently quickly found some sort of a cleat around which he could warp the rope, so that the launch would hold.

The small dinky which had been trailing behind them all this time now floated up and rubbed its blunt nose against the side of the launch, as though congratulating its companion boat on the successful termination of the voyage down the Sound.

Ethan was of an investigating turn of mind. The strange presence of that skiff there had already aroused his curiosity; and as he came of good Yankee blood Ethan was always consumed by more or less of a desire to know all about things.

No sooner had he leaped ashore than he made for the lonely boat, and proceeded to look it

over, though the light was rather poor for any job like that.

"Phil, whoever came ashore in this boat can't have gone very far away from here I should think!" he remarked, in a way that somehow caused Lub to edge back toward the others, and stop trying to look around him.

"How do you make that out, Ethan?" asked the other.

"Why, the boat's tied up here fast and good, and the oars are still wet, which last shows they've been used only a short time back."

Ethan spoke in something of a triumphant vein. It always pleased him to be able to stagger fellows like Lub, who were grossly ignorant of all kinds of woodcraft, and learning connected with the fun, fur, and feather to be found in bay, wood, or marsh; for Ethan as a trapper and rover had come to know myriads of interesting facts about these same things.

"That looks as if what you say might be true," admitted Phil, without the least hesitation; for there was never any holding back of praise on the part of the leader of the Mountain Boys when one of his chums had done something worth while.

"Oh! listen to that, will you?" whimpered

Lub; "there must be some kind of a wild animal loose around here. Didn't you hear it again, fellows?"

"But it was a groan, Lub!" protested X-Ray.

"Then some poor fellow must be hurt, and wants attention," the other continued, his opinion swayed by what Phil was saying. "P'raps some duck hunter who's gone and shot himself, and may be bleeding to death. Somebody light our lantern, and let's see!"

Phil was already doing this. He immediately came jumping ashore again from the launch, and holding a lantern in his hand. The light that came from this, while not very strong, was of enough intensity to show them their immediate surroundings.

"Over this way it comes from, Phil!" declared Ethan, leading off.

"I see him!" cried X-Ray, of course being first to glimpse the object that was extended on the ground.

So the four boys came upon a figure of a man. He seemed to be lying on his face, and groaning pitifully every little while.

Phil instantly stooped over him. So far as he could see at that first look there did not seem to be any sign of blood about the man, as might

have been the case had he suffered from a gunshot wound.

"Here, what ails you?" he asked, placing a hand on the recumbent man's shoulder.

A face that looked comparatively young was displayed as the man twisted his head around with an effort, a face that was wreathed in acute pain now.

"Be you a doctor?" he gasped; "'cause I've got the cramps *awful* bad!"

CHAPTER III

A SNUG RETREAT

WHEN the Mountain Boys heard that abject plea they hardly knew what to think about it. Instead of a hunter badly wounded by the accidental discharge of his ducking gun here a fellow told them he had been seized with cramps.

X-Ray even chuckled a little, though quickly cutting his merriment short, when he remembered that cramps could double a fellow up badly, and that one suffered all sorts of tortures while enduring a bad attack of the same. If it seemed like coming down from the sublime to the ridiculous, that did not mean it was up to them to laugh at the poor bayman's agonies.

Phil was quick to act.

"There's the shack close by, fellows," he said, swinging the lantern around so that its light fell on what seemed to be a neat-looking and modest cabin; "I've got the key to the door handy, and I'll open up while two of you help this poor fellow along."

"That's right, Phil, and give me a hand, here,

Ethan," cried X-Ray, already penitent over having been tempted to merriment. "We always carry some simple remedies along and a bit of that Sun Cholera medicine ought to stop cramps. It has with me more'n a few times, I know."

Even Lub wanted to be of some assistance, for he had a tender heart. So he made out to help hold up one end of the man with X-Ray, while Ethan looked after his lower extremities.

Meanwhile Phil had managed to undo the door of the cabin, and stepped inside. It may have been only natural curiosity that caused him to give one look around the interior, which would not be strange at all, considering under what strange conditions this property had come into his possession.

"Here, put him on this cot!" he told the others, as they came staggering in, bearing the rather weighty figure of the sick man; and Phil while speaking managed to arrange it so that the heavy boots of the stranger might not soil things.

"If we only had a lamp handy now we could get some decent light," remarked Lub; whereupon the sharp-eyed X-Ray cried out:

"What do you call this but a lamp; and say, it's even got oil in it too. After all is said and done, Phil, I guess that man Fitts was O. K."

"Get a match to it as soon as you can," Phil told him, "and I'll hurry out to the boat for our little medicine kit."

He was back again in almost no time, and carrying with him the required article. The man was not groaning now, though he watched them with a look of abject misery on his face. Phil rather liked that face as soon as he saw it; while it may not have expressed great force of character it seemed honest, and the eyes were blue and appealing.

When he had mixed a little draught the man readily swallowed it at his request.

"If the pains keep on, let me know after ten minutes, and I'll give you a second dose," Phil told his patient.

"Thank ye kindly, I feels some better a'ready," the other weakly remarked.

By this time the boys were enabled to look around them.

"Seems like a likely place, all right!" declared X-Ray Tyson, with a satisfied air.

"And," added Ethan, "look at the bunks built in the wall here, just four of 'em, as if the old gentleman just knew you'd fetch three good pards along with you when you did come down to take possession."

Phil laughed at that.

"You'll have to give me a little credit for those, boys," he informed them. "You see, I had Fitts make the last three bunks some time ago, when first I got the idea in my head I'd like to run down here with my crowd and have a fine time."

"Why, what's this but an oven he used to bake bread in!" exclaimed Lub, naturally more interested in whatever concerned the culinary department than any other part of the arrangements for comfort, though Lub did like to enjoy a soft bed as well as the next one.

"Well, we'll get you to try your hand at some biscuits first pop," Phil warned him; and from one thing they went to another, chattering like magpies as they made many fresh and interesting discoveries.

When some little time had elapsed, and Ethan proposed that they might as well start carrying their belongings from the launch into the cabin, Phil remembered their involuntary guest.

"How are you feeling now?" he asked the man on the cot.

"Better, suh," came the reply, and in such an improved tone that Phil fancied there need be no second dose of the hot medicine with camphor in it, which had once been found so wonderful

in its effects as a cholera remedy that it had since gone by that name.

Phil did not mean to ask any questions as yet. The poor fellow was welcome to use that cot during the night. In the morning after they had fed him, if he felt like explaining who he was, where he lived, and how he came to be ashore at that particular place, good enough.

It did not take long to carry their possessions from the boat to the cabin, guns, blankets, clothes bags, eatables, cooking outfit and everything else. When these were piled up on the floor awaiting a chance to dispose of them it made such a heap that Ethan wanted to know how the boat had ever contained such an enormous cargo and allowed them stowage room also.

But already had Lub started in to gather some of his wares around him. A fire had been carefully laid against their coming, by the thoughtful Fitts; so that as soon as a lighted match was applied a cheery blaze began to climb up the wide-throated chimney, which seemed to draw excellently.

"And say, I even glimpsed quite a big pile of firewood all cut and ready for us so we won't have to do very much chopping while we're down here," announced X-Ray.

"Bless Fitts!" chortled Ethan. "He was a jim dandy of a fellow after all, and for one I'm sorry he had to leave before we came down."

All of them were feeling particularly happy. Their little voyage down from Norfolk, taking advantages of canals and "cut-offs" wherever possible, had been marked by no particular excitement other than a cold, blustery storm that kept them in anything but a comfortable condition for twenty-four hours. At the same time it was rather tedious, since there was hardly room aboard the *Skoot* to allow four fellows a chance to move around; especially when one of them happened to be of the dimensions of "a house," as Ethan always declared.

The fish was soon frying nicely in the pan, the coffee coming to a boil, and a can of stewed corn warming up. They had bread and butter in plenty, and all sorts of biscuits in tins, as well as cakes of various kinds.

It was evident that Phil had entrusted part of the laying in of the provisions to the charge of Lub, which would account for the tremendous amount that had been brought.

"Better to have too much than too little, any day," Lub only answered when any one started to jab him on this score of having provided enough for a month and "then some," whereas

they only expected to be down on Currituck Sound a scant two weeks, as they had other plans ahead of them.

"I suppose we'll have to let it go at that," grumbled X-Ray, "but it does seem like a pity to squander so much money for eating."

"Oh! well, we won't complain if you knock off altogether, X-Ray," sang out the cheerful cook. "Mebbe you'll be satisfied to just watch us eat."

"I'd hate to be sitting around and *listening* to you," X-Ray got back at him; for it was well known that Lub had a habit of noisily munching his food, "champing it," the other boys always said.

"Set that table, and don't bother me any more, please, or you'll have me upsetting the grease in the fire, and burning the ranch up!" Lub told him.

"For goodness' sake leave him alone, X-Ray," begged Ethan, who was pretty hungry himself about that time, and eyeing these preparations for the meal impatiently. "We want to enjoy this shooting box belonging to Phil while we're down here. Besides, chances are he hasn't got a red cent of insurance on the shebang either. What a hard joke it'd be on the bunch of us if we got burned out the very first thing."

Thus warned X-Ray went to work to set the

table. There were a lot of decent dishes left by the late occupant, and the wonderful Fitts had them arranged in a neat closet, every piece in its place; so that what with the aluminum ware they had an abundance for all their wants.

There is nothing so much detested in camping out as the dish-washing after each and every meal. The Mountain Boys had long ago settled this by deciding to pile up the dishes until dinner was over in the evening, when all hands could get busy and make one big job of it; but of course that plan could only be followed where there were plenty of dishes to do the three meals. Luckily that happened to be the case in the present instance.

The stranger lying on the cot evinced more or less interest in what was going on about this time. Phil guessed that it was that glorious combination of cooking odors that appealed to him, and made him finally sit up.

So the first cup of coffee that was poured out he took over to the man.

"This will do you good, and warm you up inside," he told him. "Have you any idea what it was gave you the cramps? What did you eat last?"

The man took the cup gratefully, and began sipping its contents. Likely enough he had sel-

dom if ever tasted such ambrosia as that, for it was the finest coffee that money could buy, as those boys would stand for nothing less.

"I had a cold snack in the afternoon," the other told him. "I was rowing along nigh the shore, an' didn't wanter take the time tuh make a fire. They was some cold duck I had left over from the day afore, and some canned stuff."

"Well, something you ate must have sort of poisoned you; canned stuff often will if it's left in the tin until a second day. But have your pains gone now?"

"I feel tol'able good, thank yuh; but I sort o' reckons I hedn't ought tuh eat nawthin' ter-night. This cup er coffee goes right tuh the spot, and in the mawnin' I'll be O. K. ag'in. It was shore lucky fo' me you'uns comed along. I'd like tuh a died thar, that's right."

"Well, make yourself comfortable, because we want you to sleep here to-night on this cot," Phil told him, at which the young fellow's eyes opened wide.

"Does yuh mean that yuh wants me tuh stay *heah* this night, an' without me a tellin' yuh a single thing 'bout who I am, and what I'm adoin' down thisaways?" he asked, as though thunder-struck at such magnanimity.

Phil smiled.

"Oh! I guess we can trust you, my friend," he said, pleasantly; "we know an honest man when we see him. If you feel like eating anything, just sing out, and you're as welcome as the sunshine in May."

The blue eyes of the young fellow actually looked a bit misty, and Phil, not wishing to be thanked for doing such a little thing, hurried away to secure a portion of the supper for himself.

There were several stools, and a home-made chair in the cabin; as well as a good bench, so none of them had to squat upon the floor to eat. Around the table they gathered, and with plenty of humorous remarks started to eat their homely but appetizing camp fare.

"Don't talk to me about your Delmonico dinners of fifteen courses," said Lub; as he helped himself for the third time to the coffee; "a few things, and plenty of them suit me a heap better."

"Hey! there," spoke up Ethan, who had not kept pace with the cook, "but don't get the notion into your head that this is a fifteen help dinner, because there are a few others alongside that haven't finished their first cup yet."

"I'm sorry then that you don't appreciate my

cooking," said Lub, sweetly; "and rather than see things wasted, why I'll even make a martyr of myself, and choke them down."

Of course this was all said in fun, for there was ample for all hands and to spare. Phil even coaxed the sick man to have another cup of coffee, for he saw that it was doing him good.

When the other started to say something about himself Phil shook his head.

"Don't bother telling us a single thing to-night, Malachi," he said, for the man had already gotten as far as to say that was his name—Malachi Jorden. "In the morning if you feel like it you can spin the yarn. And perhaps we might want to make it worth your while to stick by us. There was a man named Fitts who used to take charge of this place of mine, but a brother in Texas sent for him, and offered to set him up on a fine farm if he'd come, so I lost him. I shall want to find somebody to take charge of this place a little later on."

So he left Malachi Jorden. The young man stared after him, and was seen to shake his head several times as he looked around the interior of the cabin. Perhaps he was thinking what a delightful little home that could be made if one only had the girl of his choice along to share the toil, and the joy of living; for Malachi in Phil's

estimation looked rather like a sentimental fellow, and not at all built after the manner of most of the rude baymen they had so far met along the Sounds of North Carolina.

After supper Phil and Ethan took the lantern and went out to look after the launch. It was their intention to anchor the boat out in the cove where she might swing to her cable.

Poling the launch out to the proper spot they heaved her anchor overboard, saw that everything was snug against snow or rain, for they were prepared against all downfalls, and then went ashore again. The little dinky was very useful for this sort of ferriage. It would also come in very handy for putting out their "stools" or decoys when they came to settle down to the shooting business. These wooden and metal imitations were still snugly stowed away aboard the boat, just as the owner of the craft had them when it was leased for a time by Phil Bradley.

"That job's done," remarked Ethan as they paddled ashore; "and how about that sick man, Phil?"

Upon which Phil explained what he had been turning over in his mind, at hearing which the other boy hastily declared that his own thoughts ran in the same direction.

CHAPTER IV

THE GOOD TIMES BEGIN

“**H**OW are we going to settle about the bunks?” asked Lub, as they sat around and watched the fire burning cheerily on the hearth.

Lub tried to say this in a careless fashion, but Phil knew what was passing in the mind of the heavy-weight. If Lub could only secure one of the lower bunks it would gratify him beyond measure, for it really needed some dexterity to climb in and out of the ones higher up; and Lub was short on nimbleness, as a rule.

“There’s only one fair way to do that,” asserted X-Ray, decidedly, with a wink in the direction of Ethan, which would indicate that he too understood why Lub had brought up this question.

“You don’t say?” ejaculated Lub. “And what might that method be, X-Ray?”

“Draw lots for ’em,” came the prompt answer, as the tall boy started to pick up a number of slivers of wood, which he began to break into uneven lengths.

Lub watched the operation with wrinkled brow. To the others it mattered nothing at all whether they secured an upper or lower sleeping compartment; nor would any one of them care if it happened to be nearer the fire or away from it.

"Explain your scheme, X-Ray, so we'll all know the details," Phil remarked, already making up his mind that if by chance he should be given a lower berth, and the fat boy an upper one, he would gladly exchange.

And in fact that same idea was working in the mind of both Ethan and X-Ray, although they gave no hint as yet of such magnanimity.

"Oh! it's the old, old story," said X-Ray Tyson; "here you see I am holding four slivers of wood, though generally we use broom straws; and they are of different lengths, from one up to four. Now, I'm going to shuffle them so nobody can tell which ones are long and which short. Then each fellow draws a sliver. That's all."

He turned his back to them, and proceeded to manipulate the contents of his hand.

"Then the shorts get it, do they?" asked Lub, anxiously.

"Yes, they get it in the neck," replied the other; "by which I mean of course the fellows

who draw the shorter straws have to do the grand climbing act every time they go to bed."

"Oh! dear! Well, you take a turn, Phil, and then Ethan. I'll come third, and the last straw will be for X-Ray, of course," and Lub tried to brace up while laying out the program in this manner.

"Hope the last straw doesn't break the camel's back, like they say it often has a nasty habit of doing," muttered X-Ray, as he whirled around upon them, and held out his hand, from which the heads of the four slivers projected enticingly.

Phil and Ethan drew theirs without the slightest hesitation. In fact they did not even bother to look at their choice immediately. With Lub it was a different story. One might have thought the fate of nations depended on the result of his choice, so long did he deliberate, first touching one of the two remaining "straws" and then hastily drawing back as though afraid.

The others were laughing at him, and saying all manner of things calculated to add to Lub's evident distress and uncertainty.

"For goodness' sake hurry up, Lub," urged X-Ray; "want to keep me standing here all night, do you? I prefer to crawl into my lower berth, if you must know it."

"First choice is always best, Lub, so go back to the one you meant to take in the start," coaxed Ethan.

Finally Lub, rendered desperate, actually closed his eyes, groped around until he felt the hand of the arbiter of his fate, and hastily drew a sliver.

A shout went up from the others, because poor Lub had after all picked the very shortest straw of all. He looked at it dejectedly, and heaved a heavy sigh.

"All I can say is I'm sorry for the poor fellow below me, that's what," he went on to remark; and at that Ethan and X-Ray, who had been fortunate enough to secure the most prized berths, laughed again.

"He means there's always a chance of the bunk breaking down under his weight, and flattening one of us out like a pancake, Ethan!" cried the tall boy, pretending to be exceedingly worried.

"Well, we can't afford to take such a terrible chance, X-Ray," Ethan remarked; "and so it's up to one of us to change with Lub."

"Oh! but that wouldn't be fair!" protested Lub, his sportsman spirit up in arms against seeming to be catered to, as though he were a favored one; "I had as much chance as the next.

I drew a blank, and you got the prizes, that's all. I'm willing to stand for the racket, and take my medicine."

"But we object!" Ethan told him.

"You'd better believe we do," added the other chum, vigorously. "I forgot to take out any insurance against getting smashed. No, sir, you've got to change with me; I insist on it!"

"But where do I come in?" demanded Ethan. "I really want an upper bunk, and here you are trying to knock me out of my chance. The air's better up there."

Phil laughed. It did him a lot of good to see that both the other boys must have determined in their minds that they would change with Lub.

"Only one way to settle that matter, fellows," he told them. "X-Ray, get two of your sticks, and give them to me. I'll hold them, and let you choose. Shorter one is doomed to change with Lub; longer one stays below."

The selection was speedily made. It turned out that after all X-Ray was the one fated to climb to the upper berth. He appeared to be vastly pleased with the way Fate had treated him.

"That's most always the way with me; and I get what I want in the end," he said, with one of his grins.

After that they kept chattering away on divers subjects until all of them began to feel sleepy. Malachi Jorden had lain there on his cot, covered with a blanket, and listening to this merry chatter, for a long time. It was evidently a new experience for the young bayman of the Tarheel State, and he certainly must have enjoyed it, for they were a lively set, and there was plenty of fun passed around.

When Phil finally got up and asked Ethan to step out with him for a last look around before they retired they found that Malachi was fast asleep. He must have done a vast amount of rowing on the rough bay that preceding day, which exertion, together with the cramps, had played him out.

So the two boys went out-of-doors, and walked down to the edge of the water. The clouds still hung heavy overhead, so that the moon had no chance to light up the bay and the shore.

"Listen to the waves pounding, will you?" said Ethan. "I always like to hear that in the night, though salt water is something new to me. Must be quite a breeze out on the Sound, I should say, Phil?"

"Yes, you can hear it singing through the trees back yonder," replied the other; "it makes

a mournful sound, and I've heard people compare it to a funeral dirge, though I never went quite that far myself."

"Listen now, and you'll hear ducks quacking," Ethan exclaimed. "Seems to come from over yonder, where, if I remember rightly, you said there was some sort of a marsh on your chart."

"You're right, Ethan, it's a marsh, and I guess those must be black ducks we hear right now. It may be they're wing-tipped by some stray shot; for when a duck is wounded as a rule it stays in a marsh until it gets well again, avoiding the open water."

"Did you hear that far-away shot then—there goes a second one, Phil?"

"Yes, and it must be some illegal duck hunter poaching on a flock he's located!" the other boy declared, with some indignation. "You see, the State has passed certain laws for the protection of wild fowl in their passage North and South. One of these is that there shall be no shooting after a certain hour, which means when night has settled down."

"But some of these pot hunters break that law once in a while, do they, Phil?"

"Yes; not through ignorance of the law, but because temptation to pot a raft of fat ducks

is too much for them. I'd like to see every such hunter arrested, and either heavily fined or sent to the stone jug for a term."

"It ought to be the last thing, then," Ethan added, for he had the true instincts of a genuine sportsman in his make-up, and would never take undue advantage of any game-fish or animal when hunting.

"If you watch carefully in that direction," Phil told him, "just over the tops of the trees, you will see what seems to be a glow rise and fall."

"Yes, now that you mention it I do see something, Phil. Looks for all the world like the flickering light of a camp fire, too."

"I rather guess that's just what it is, Ethan."

"Oh! you mean that fire we saw as we came along, where the savage old man hollered out at us. Yes, it must lie in that direction, Phil. He was a terror, wasn't he? I wonder if we're going to have any trouble with the old pirate while we're down here. He looked to me as if he might be just such a chap as the one whose big eight-bore gun we just heard while he was shooting ducks illegally."

"That may be wronging him, Ethan, and so perhaps you'd better not say it again until we know more about him. He might turn out to

be one of the property owners on the Sound. All the land down here isn't gobbled up by Northern sportsmen, though they have managed to lease nearly every decent point on Currituck for their clubs' use during the shooting season."

"Well, the fact that he had that pretty young woman along with him makes it look as if there might be something in that," admitted Ethan. "She must be his daughter, and mebbe when you'd get to know the fiery old chap he'd turn out to be fairly decent after all."

"It isn't a good thing to judge a man until you do know him," said Phil. "I own up I've been guilty of doing the same more than a few times, but that only makes me believe what I'm preaching more than ever. Here's this Malachi Jorden, the poor chap we picked up twisted in a knot almost at our very door; first glimpse at him and you might think he was a regular tramp, but the more I see of him the better I like him."

Ethan was not at all enthusiastic. Yankee born he seemed to have a streak of extra caution in his composition that made him a little suspicious of trusting strangers.

"H'm! I'd go a little bit slow there if I was you, Phil," he said, dubiously.

"You mean about our new addition, don't you, Ethan?"

"Oh! I'm not saying that he isn't all right," the other boy hastened to add, "but it looks a little queer, what he was doing out on the bay. I reckon he's been rowing that old boat of his for a week steady, and sleeping in her too. He hasn't any sort of a home, I guess you'll find, Phil. There are a few things you ought to learn about Malachi before you go to trusting him too much."

"I expect to learn something in the morning," Phil told him, "but there's something about that face and blue eyes of his I like. I should say he's had some trouble that's pretty nearly crushed him, but that he's honest and straight."

"Oh! well, if he should stay with us we haven't got anything worth much to risk, outside of our guns," Ethan continued, as though reconciled to Phil's plan, which he guessed must include the retention of Malachi as a feature of the camp.

"Mark my words, Ethan, we'll not be apt to suffer through any act of Malachi. He seems to be grateful for what little we've been able to do for him so far. I'm going to watch him, and if he turns out as I think he will, there's a steady job open to him here."

"Taking care of your property, you mean?" remarked Ethan.

"Just as Fitts used to do. This cabin makes a comfortable home, and there's plenty to be done on the property, I imagine. Of course I'll know heaps more about that part of it when I leave here. But let's go in and get to bed, Ethan."

"I'm sleepy enough for the job," admitted the other, yawning. "The launch seems to be riding all right off there, the dinky is pulled well up on the shore, and everything is O. K. Me to hit the hay, Phil."

"Yes, because we'll find plenty to do to-morrow, if only it doesn't storm. You know they get a lot of bad weather along down here, from Cape Fear to Cape Hatteras. The last is called the Storm Cape, and few vessels ever pass it without some sort of a blow."

"Yes, I've read all about it, and how the whole coast is really a graveyard for the skeletons of ships that have been wrecked on the shoals off Hatteras. The Government maintains a lightship off there, and life-saving crews are ready to respond to any call for help; but in spite of light house and all, vessels are lost every year by dozens."

They looked off across the Sound in a general

direction toward the famous cape, and as the wind veered just then a little toward the northeast Phil believed that he could catch a faint sound like the booming of the surf rolling up on that fatal shore.

So the two chums again entered the cabin, to find that while they were out Lub and X-Ray had managed to get into their pajamas, and were now snugly tucked in their several bunks.

"Last one to bed douse the glim!" Lub told them, thrusting his beaming face out from his bunk.

Ten minutes later, and save for the smoldering fire on the hearth the interior of the cabin on the shore of Currituck Sound was left to the darkness. Outside the winnowing sound of the passing owl's wings; the splash of the wavelets on the beach; the muttering of the wind through the whispering pines; or possibly the snarling of 'coons along the shore, seeking a supper, told of the solitude that had gripped that night in its toils.

CHAPTER V

THE DUCK BLIND ON PUTNEY POINT

WHEN Phil Bradley opened his eyes he saw that it was probably morning, for the light was stealing in through the window. Hearing some one moving he looked toward the fireplace, and discovered that it was Malachi Jorden.

The young bayman was starting up the fire so that the cabin might be warm and cheerful when the boys felt like climbing out.

So Phil purposely lay there without saying a word, and watched every action of their guest. He meant to judge Malachi from what he saw when the other did not know that he was being observed.

Little things told Phil that the other was as neat as wax about how he did his work. One can find this sort of thing out very easily under the proper conditions; and Phil was certainly pleased.

"Malachi, you're all to the good, and the right man for the job, I should say," Phil was telling

himself as he saw the other carefully brush up the hearth after he had started the fire to crackling merrily; and then in various other ways manifest that spirit of cleanliness so rare in a man, but which once possessed cannot be kept down, no matter what the conditions surrounding him may be.

Then a loud yawn told that some one else had awakened, and pretty soon Lub came plunging from his lower bunk very much like an elephant charging.

"Great Christopher!" cried X-Ray, thrusting out his head; "whatever would have happened now if I hadn't changed bunks with that poor thing? It would be our painful duty to sweep him up with the broom every morning. Is that the way you get out of bed, Lub?"

Lub only laughed, for he was not hurt.

"X-Ray," he said, "you make me think of the Irishman who heard the sunset gun go off after he got to this country, and asked what it meant. They told him it was the sun going down, 'Begorry!' he said, 'the sun niver do be going down wid a bang like that in Ould Oireland.' And as a rule I don't trip and sprawl on my nose when I get out of bed."

Everybody was soon up and dressed. Strangely enough no one seemed crazy to run

down to the water and take an early morning plunge.

"I'm not fond of breaking the ice when I go in bathing," X-Ray told Phil, when the owner of the shooting-box generously offered to show him a place where he might dive off a little bluff into deep water.

After all his superior talk about "assistants" and "scullions" and all that, Lub seemed about to take upon his broad shoulders the chief duties of preparing the meals. Of course the other fellows would not stand for that, and it might be found that sooner or later all of them would have a share in the labor.

Malachi Jorden hovered near, ready to carry in wood, or assist Lub in any possible way. And often Phil would observe the fact that Malachi wiped his feet on the old mat at the door every time he came in, which was something none of the boys thought of doing.

"He's been well broken into the harness by some careful mother," Phil chuckled to himself; "and the more I see of Malachi the better I like him. But I wish he didn't look so sad sometimes, when he thinks no one is watching him. There's something hanging heavy on the poor chap's mind."

For breakfast they fried some ham and eggs,

that being a favorite dish with Lub, and he had seen to it that they had a good stock of the ingredients to draw from. With the coffee, condensed cream and sugar, they also had plenty of bread and butter. And another time Lub promised that fried potatoes should accompany their breakfast.

"Wait till I get my hand in, fellows, that's all," he told them as they sat at the table and ate, even Malachi being forced to join them. "I've got some genuine surprises to spring on you later. You'll either vote me a real *chef*, or else—well, I don't want to think of the other fate that may come upon me if I fail!"

Phil expected to take a saunter around with Ethan, carrying their guns along. He was quite anxious to see what his property consisted of, and would doubtless find occasion to refer many times to the little chart which had been drawn by the former owner and sent to him with the deeds of the place.

Before going, however, Phil thought he would give Malachi a chance to explain a little. It was only fair that they should know something about him; and in return Phil intended to ask how he would like to remain there with them as long as they occupied the cabin.

He had made up his mind not to be too hasty

about mentioning that other possible employment connected with the charge of the property year in and year out. That would do to keep for another time, after he had made sure that Malachi would be the proper custodian to select.

With this idea in mind, after breakfast was over he asked the man to go with him and do some little thing in connection with the dinky—drag it back closer to the edge of the water, so it could be readily launched when they wished to bring the decoys ashore from the larger boat.

Malachi was apparently waiting for some such chance, for before they even got to the little “punkin-seed” as Ethan often called the short tender, he started speaking of himself.

“I thought I’d mend my boat a little this mawnin’, so’s I could git goin’ this arternoon, if so be yuh ain’t got no ’jections,” he remarked, gulping something down that threatened to choke him.

“But do you have to leave us, Malachi?” asked Phil. “You remember I told you we might want some one to stay with us, and help us in lots of ways, for we’re down here to have a good time, and not to work too hard. How about that, Malachi; would you be willing to

stay with us at the rate of ten dollars a week and your keep?"

His face lighted up instantly.

"I shore reckons it'd be a mighty fine thing fo' me, suh!" he exclaimed, eagerly.

"Then will you call it a bargain, Malachi?"

The bayman looked serious. Phil remembered his previous conviction to the effect that there was something burdening the other's mind. And he imagined that there was some sort of struggle going on now. Finally Malachi spoke.

"I'll stop with yuh, fo' the two weeks yuh're agwine tuh be down heah, suh. And I'll do the best I knows how to wait on yuh all. Thet other thing kin keep. 'Sides, I ain't got nary a red cent, an' how kin I go along lookin' fo' anybody without any money? Yes, suh, I shore accept that offer, thankin' yuh kindly."

"All right, then, Malachi," said Phil, "and it might be possible that before I leave here I may have something further to say to you about another job, if we're pleased with your way of doing things. I like neatness above all else, and you seem to take to it like a duck does to water. You may have a chance to stay here, Malachi."

There, Phil had done just what he had told ~~himself~~ he would not for some time yet; but it

was worth while to see the light break over the troubled face of the young bayman as he stared at Phil.

Malachi drew a long sigh.

"I'd shore do a heap tuh please yuh that fur, suh," he said, fervently. "Mebbe then he'd let up on me, and believe I wasn't the wuthless cur he reckons me."

Phil of course could not make out what these mysterious words might mean. They gave him food for thought later on, but unless he got more light he could only surmise.

"Do you come from around here, Malachi?" he asked the man.

"No, suh, I lived down on Albemarle Sound; leastways my folks they lives thar. I ain't got no home jest now, since she—" and he swallowed hard again, which emotion gave Phil the impression that possibly Malachi might have lost his mother lately, which would have been an explanation of the sad expression that could be seen now and then on his gaunt but not bad looking face.

Albemarle Sound was quite a long distance away from where they were now located, and evidently Malachi had rowed that old boat of his many weary miles, as though searching for something that constantly eluded him.

Something was keeping the man from taking Phil fully into his confidence; but the boy did not consider this a serious matter.

"He's a shy, awkward fellow," Phil told himself; "and until he gets to know me better he hesitates to speak of matters that may lie close to his heart. All in good time he'll open up, I guess. And meantime I'm ready to trust Malachi. No one with those honest blue eyes could turn out to be a rogue."

Nothing more was said, though Phil could see that the vastness of the idea was filling Malachi's soul with great joy, from some reason or other. Really the man walked with a more springy step, and held his shoulders up as though Phil's half promise had made him feel he was no longer ashamed to look any one in the face.

Phil hunted up Ethan.

"Get your gun and shell-holder, and we'll take a little walk around, Ethan," he told the other, knowing that this would please the one who loved shooting as much as the Allan boy did.

Phil instead of carrying a gun took his camera along.

"We might run across something that would make a fine picture," he explained, as they

started forth. "There's an old saying to the effect that it's wonderful what remarkable things you see when you haven't got your gun; and I've found it about the same with a camera. Lots of things have skipped me because I'd gone and left it at home. So now I go prepared most of the time, even if it has to be this little dot."

He took the smallest possible camera from his pocket as he said this, although at the same time carrying the larger one.

Phil had done some pretty clever flashlight work on a previous occasion while the Mountain Boys were camping up in the Adirondacks; and if the opportunity came he hoped to add to his list of pictures while spending these two weeks on Currituck Sound.

His policy was to set a trap so that in taking the bait the prowling animal would touch a trigger, and cause the flashlight powder to flame up, thus actually taking its own picture. In most cases it worked to a charm, so rapid was the action of the lens, and the adjustment of the contrivance.

This method of hunting with a camera was growing steadily in favor with Phil; so that he did not care for shooting one-half as much as he used to. The case was different with regard

to Ethan, who had all of the hunter's instincts in his nature, and was never so happy as when tramping the woods, with a gun over his shoulder.

Thus it will be seen that they made an excellent team, the one to look after the pot, and the other to provide a source of never ending pleasure in days to come.

Phil carried his map of the property and its surroundings with him, for he wanted to be sure of his ground. To infringe on some neighbor's rights often proved a source of trouble and even litigation; and this was what Phil did not wish to incur if it could be avoided. At the same time he hoped no one would take advantage of the known fact that the Putney place now had no keeper, to occupy any point that came within its boundaries.

From which it can be assumed that even thus early Phil felt it in his bones he was going to have trouble with a near neighbor.

"Which way first, Phil?" asked Ethan, cheerily, as they walked along over the hard frozen ground, and with the broad Sound on their right.

"Why, as you'll be wanting to do some duck shooting by to-morrow morning, Ethan, I thought we might as well look up that valuable point first of all."

"Which sounds good to me, Phil; do you happen to know whether it's got a blind of any sort on the same?"

"I believe it has," the other told Ethan. "Strikes me I had a letter from the keeper to that effect. These points are used season after season, so a permanent blind is erected on them, in order to let flying ducks get accustomed to seeing them. You'll get teal and blacks, and perhaps mallards from the point. If you want canvasbacks or redheads it may be necessary to go out in the bay and set a sinkbox."

"That's something I've read about but never tried," said Ethan. "We might be able to hire one from some of the people along the bay; just to have a turn at that kind of shooting, though the point style pleases me most."

"The same with me," continued Phil; "for you can jump around when it's cold; while in the battery you have to lie flat on your back, and have the sun streaming down in your face for hours at a time."

"Then you've tried it, have you, Phil?"

"Once, only, down on Great South Bay, Long Island. That's a magnificent view we get of the Sound, isn't it, Ethan? The sun looks fine to me, because I thought we might be in for a bad storm; but it cleared up nicely."

"Can that be your point we're going to open up?" asked the hunter of Phil.

"No question about it, it's the only point above the shack. This little bay conforms to what's marked here. Hello! just as I thought."

"You mean that flock of ducks off the point?"

"Those are the decoys or stools, Ethan."

"Whew! look at that pair of teal coming in, Phil! Let's see what happens to them!" and the two chums remained perfectly still.

The teal darted toward the water just off the point. Then they could be seen to rise as though suspicious of the sun glinting on the painted backs of the gross deceptions.

A head was seen to rise suddenly above the ducking blind; then came a sharp report and one bird fell with a splash. Before it struck the water another shot sounded, and the second ill-fated teal also plunged downward like a stone.

The two boys stared at each other in dismay.

Those shots had been excellent ones, and worthy of admiration; but at the same time they had conveyed some very unpleasant information to Phil and his chum; for it was now evident that their rude and churlish neighbor had commandeered Putney Point blind; and possession is often nine points of the law.

CHAPTER VI

NO SURRENDER

“**W**ELL, that’s what I call nerve for you!” said Ethan, indignantly, as they stood there and watched the big man sending out his retriever dog for the two dead teal.

Phil fancied the man knew of their presence but meant to pay no attention to them. He looked more ponderous and dangerous than ever as he stood there directing the eager dog how to swim, so as to recover the birds floating on their backs, bellowing out commands in the manner of one whose will must not be crossed unless under penalty of provoking his dreadful temper.

“I’m sorry,” Phil went on to say.

“And I’m hopping mad!” declared Ethan, handling his double-barrel twelve-bore shotgun in rather a menacing way, so that Phil shook his head, and putting out his hand pushed the weapon down.

“Mustn’t think of anything like that, Ethan,” he said, firmly; “it could only be excused if

your life or mine was in danger. I wouldn't want to get into a fight with anybody, and least of all that hard case out there, just for the pleasure of using a blind a few mornings."

"But it'll spoil all our fun, Phil?"

"I guess not," was the reply Phil made. "We'll find some other point to build a blind on that may give us all the shooting we want. Besides, that was to be only one part of the fun we expected to have down here. Why, if we didn't bag a brace of ducks the whole stay I think I could enjoy it first-rate."

"Yes, there are heaps of things we laid out to do," admitted Ethan, who died hard; "but it sure riles me to see that giant Tarheel out there holding the fort that actually belongs to you."

"There may be some dispute about title, for all we know, if that's his property adjoining mine," urged Phil, cautiously. "These fights over boundaries always give lots of trouble, because each side believes it is in the right."

"But you've got your map, Phil!"

"Yes, made by Alexander Putney, remember, Ethan. Perhaps that man has another map that he got up, or his surveyors, giving him title to that point."

"Huh! do you know what I think?" demanded Ethan.

"I'm ready to listen," Phil told him.

"All right. I don't believe that fellow ever owned a rod of ground on Currituck Sound, not in all his life," declared Ethan, vehemently. "He looks to me like a poacher, or a squatter, and just as soon as not I'd believe he's settled down on the land near yours, meaning to stay there and shoot ducks for the market any old way. That's my opinion, if you want to know, Phil."

The other laughed a little. But then he was used to Ethan's ways, and knew how to take him.

"I'm going to call out and ask him a few questions," he told his chum; "but I don't want you butting in and interfering, remember; because I know how hot you can get and I'm afraid you'd be throwing oil on the fire to put it out. Promise to let me do the talking?"

"Oh! all right, Phil, just as you say. Only I hate to think of trying to win a game by diplomacy and soft words when kicks are needed more."

Phil himself did not have very high hopes of succeeding in reconciling the big hunter to their presence near by; or of inducing him to forego using the blind built on Putney Point, that was

plainly within the property rights of Phil Bradley as left to him by the late owner.

"Hello! neighbor!" he called out, placing his hand, shaped like a cup, to his lips, in order to cause his voice to carry better.

The big man deigned to look toward them, and Ethan gritted his teeth to see how blackly he scowled.

"That's a clever retriever you have there!" Phil next remarked, knowing how in many cases the best way to a hunter's heart is by way of flattering his dog.

"Hey! think so, does ye?" he heard the giant say.

"And I never saw a prettier double than the way you dropped those ducks. Are they teal or widgeon?" continued Phil.

"Teal, I shore reckons they be," replied the man, apparently a little mollified after having all this flattery poured upon his head.

Phil now went a little further.

"This is what they call Putney's Point, isn't it?" he asked.

"It may be; I don't know er care!" came the gruff reply.

"I only asked because I happen to be the new owner of all the Putney property along the

shore here, and my friends have hoped to shoot from the one good blind my keeper has arranged for our use, and which you are now occupying."

"Fust come, fust sarved, is weuns motto down heah. I got the blind an' I calc'lates on keepin' the same!"

"Oh! wouldn't I like to tell him what I think of him!" grumbled Ethan, who was fidgeting about as though on needles and pins.

"Keep still, Ethan, and remember what you promised," Phil remarked. "No good would come from making him desperately angry. We've got the law on our side it's true, but once you get into a fight with these people down here and you'll find every native against you. They are clannish people I'm told. We've got to work it through diplomacy rather than force, or by calling on the law to help us, so let's use our brains."

"Just as you say, Phil, but it goes against the grain awfully to have to knuckle down to such a big brute as that scamp out there."

"Not so loud, I tell you, Ethan, and leave it to me to settle. We can play him at his own game. You heard what he said about 'first come, first served,' didn't you? Well, when he gets here at daybreak to-morrow we'll be the

ones to warn him off, and give him his own words back."

"And Phil, in that case I feel pretty sure he's mean enough to locate just above here, on his own ground perhaps, and blaze away at every duck heading in toward our stools, just to keep us from getting them."

"Well, that would be too small, I should think, for any one who called himself a man to attempt. There, if that dog hasn't managed to fetch both teal in at once."

"He's a jim-dandy dog, all right, and listen to him bark, will you, just as if the little creature was proud of his feat. I'd like to own a dog like that. Wonder if the old man'd sell him."

"You might sound him some time or other," laughed Phil; "but chances are money couldn't buy that dog. These baymen think as much of their animals as they say about the Arabs and their horses, more'n they do of their families. Ever heard of a 'toll dog,' Ethan?"

"Not that I can remember; tell me what sort of a beast he is, Phil?"

"Oh! any old kind of yellow cur that's been trained to do the stunt of coaxing ducks to come within range of his master's gun," the other remarked, dryly.

"What's that you're giving me now?" demanded Ethan, skeptically.

"I never saw it done, of course," Phil explained, "but lots of hunters have, and I have read all about it. They play the game when there's a large bed of ducks out on the bay that refuses to come in near the shore. The owner of the dog hides in the bushes with his gun, and perhaps several other men. Then the dog is told to start in with his circus."

"Circus?" repeated Ethan, wonderingly.

"Well, that's about what it is," Phil continued. "The little dog rushes down on the sandy strip of beach and begins to bark and act as if crazy, rolling around, jumping up in the air, and chasing back and forth. Now ducks are very curious, just like antelope on the plains which are lured within gunshot by a piece of fluttering red rag. They begin to stretch their necks, and watch the queer antics of the tolling dog. Gradually they swim a little closer and closer, all the time quacking, and now and then getting up to flap their wings as if sharing in the excitement. And of course when they've come close enough the hunters let fly and make a big bag because the ducks are huddled together in a mass."

"That's surely an interesting thing you've

been telling me, Phil. Strange that I never happened to hear or read about tolling ducks with a dog. And if the native crackers have got their yellow curs trained like that I don't wonder they think heaps of the little beasts. I know I would."

Phil knew there was really no use of trying to continue the unsatisfactory conversation with the big man out there in the blind on the point. He had been looking for just this sort of thing to develop, and therefore was not greatly surprised when it came about.

"I say, neighbor," he did call out, "we'd like to arrange with you for alternate mornings in that blind. We want to be neighborly, you understand!"

"What's that?" demanded the other, in a surly and suspicious tone.

"You use it one morning," explained Phil, "and then we would occupy it the next. Tomorrow you might let us have a try; and the following morning we'd be glad to have you shoot from Putney Point blind."

The man laughed harshly at hearing this unique proposition. He evidently understood that he had to deal with a parcel of boys from the North, and was disposed to look upon them as worthy only of contempt.

"I ain't amakin' any sech bargains as that, sonny," he replied. "I 'spects tuh use this heah blind jest when I feels like hit. Suits me fust-rate an' I reckons I'll get a good husky bag this mawnin'. Them teal makes sixteen, yuh see. So-long! I wouldn't stand out thar long, so as tuh skeer my birds away, ef I was you."

He ducked down into the blind again, and the dog ceased his joyous yapping.

"The hog!" muttered Ethan, angrily, "he must be shooting for the market, because he never could begin to use that many ducks. He ought to be tarred and feathered, or ridden on a rail. That's the only cure for game hogs."

"Oh! well, different people look at things from various angles," remarked Phil, as they started away from the water-front. "A lot of folks have the old instincts of the Indian deep down in their heart, and believe that all wild game belongs to him who can take it, no matter what he means to do with it afterwards. They protest that it was intended for the food of man, and that as it migrates north and south it's silly for any one State or county to claim any right to prevent a hungry man from getting his dinner whenever he wants it."

"Where away now, Phil?" asked Ethan, who did not like to get into an argument with the

other, because he always lost his temper, and Phil came out ahead. Possibly he also realized that there might be a whole lot in what Phil was saying; and that people did look at things from opposite sides, according to whether they were rich sportsmen, or poverty-stricken natives accustomed to hunting when the larder ran low.

"I'll tell you of a sudden notion that came to me while we were talking with that old man," said Phil. "We might in looking around just *happen* on his shack, and pick up a little information about him from his folks."

"Phil, that's a good idea!" burst out Ethan, once more looking pleasant, for he had been scowling fearfully.

"You like it, then, do you, Ethan?"

"Well, now don't go and poke fun at me, Phil, but I own up that I'd like a whole lot to see what that girl looks like by daylight. I only had a glimpse of her when the fire jumped up, and she was a peach, a regular North Carolina peach."

"Like as not she's only one of a whole brood," suggested Phil, "though we haven't heard any carryings-on over there from a wild pack of kids, so far. But if it happens that the old man has got a family, we stand a chance to learn who and what he is."

"Guess you want to know whether he really owns that adjoining land, or if he's just a squatter, and a market hunter bent on slaughtering all the game he can, any way he can get it?"

"That's the idea I had in my mind," admitted Phil, frankly; for he was not the one to beat around the bush. "But one thing you didn't happen to notice that I managed to do while we stood there."

"Did you take a snap picture of our friend occupying your blind?" asked Ethan, delightedly, and when Phil smiled and nodded, he continued; "that's what I call a clever dodge, for if ever it comes to a trial at court you've got the evidence of his holding your property that no jury would pass over. Hope it turns out all right, Phil."

"Everything seemed favorable," the owner of the camera declared, positively; "the sun was on my right, and I think the focus was about correct. It ought to give me a good picture. And anybody living on the Sound would be able to swear to Putney's Point blind, because it differs from all others, I was told."

"Then keep your eyes about you," said Ethan, "and perhaps you'll get a chance to snap off one of the girl we saw. If his shack is anything like some we've noticed belonging to these natives down here, from Norfolk south, it's bound to be

picturesque enough to be worth while taking for a background. We can label it 'The Mysterious Beauty of Currituck,' and have the fellows in Brewster wild to know about her."

"We're hunting ducks down here, Ethan, not deer. Just remember that, and don't cast sheep's eyes at the pretty coast girls. But we must be close to the camp fire. Yes, I caught a whiff of smoke then. We might ask for a drink of water, if so be they have any sort of well or spring here like the one at our place."

A minute later Ethan remarked in a whisper, "There's the shack."

There was no sign of life about the place just then. Even the fire had burned very nearly out, though a handful of small wood was all that might be needed to rekindle it at any time desired.

The door of the rough shack stood partly open.

"Listen, she's singing in there to herself!" said Ethan.

When Phil knocked sharply on the door the sad song suddenly ceased.

"I hope we haven't frightened her, Ethan," Phil was saying, when turning again he found that the girl was standing there before them, and holding in her grasp a light gun, which she seemed to know how to handle as though accustomed to firearms.

CHAPTER VII

AT THE BLODGETT SHACK

“**C**OULD you give us a drink of water, please?” Phil had sense enough to ask.

The girl stared very hard at them. Phil saw that she was pretty, and yet at the same time she did not seem to be pleased. Perhaps she held a poor opinion of the city sportsmen whom she may have met from time to time.

“There’s a cup at the bar’l, stranger; hits all the kind of water weuns have to drink ’cept we goes across lots to Putney’s spring. Knock right smart on the top of the water with the tin cup. We got heaps of wigglers this season, an’ they hangs on right peart into the cold.”

It struck the boys as odd to hear this sort of language falling from the lips of such a pretty looking girl. Still, they knew she could not have had any schooling to speak of, and with such an uncouth father what more could be expected?

“By wigglers I guess you must mean skeeters, miss,” said Ethan, boldly, bound to have her

turn her big gray eyes toward him, for she seemed to be staring hard at Phil most of the time.

“Them’s hit, an’ bigger skeeters nor we’ve ever known down whar we come from. Thar’s the bar’l; help yuhselfes!”

But as it was Phil’s plan to engage her in conversation he was in no hurry to break away.

“There you are, Ethan,” he said in a sprightly way; “if you’re so thirsty you just can’t wait till we get over home, have a drink. But hit the top of the water with the cup, Ethan, if you don’t want to swallow a lot of wigglers. They sink to the bottom as quick as you do that, and the water’s clear.”

Ethan frowned, and then chuckled.

“Well, I like that!” he was heard to mutter as he edged away, still keeping his eye on Phil and the girl, and listening to what was said.

“Is your name Jones, miss?” asked Phil, immediately; just as if some one had informed him that a family of that name lived there.

“No, it hain’t!” she replied, instantly; “hit’s Tillie.”

“Is the big man in the duck blind over yonder your pa?” continued the boy, with an insinuating smile.

“Reckons he be,” came the reply.

"Would you mind telling me his name, Tillie?"

"What, him? Hit's Blodgett, Simon Blodgett. Sho'! I thought everybody knowed him."

"And do you own this place here?" Phil asked next.

The shore girl eyed him suspiciously when he said this. Perhaps she imagined he was trying to get her respected parent into some snarl of trouble, for her reply was quick and pertinent.

"I don't see what business that kin be of yours, stranger!" she told him.

"I beg your pardon," said Phil, as he saw a flush of anger coloring her cheeks; "I only asked out of idle curiosity. I thought it would be nice to know my neighbors, because it happens that I own the Putney property, you see."

"Be you that Bradley feller we hearn tell about, Mister?"

"Yes, I'm Phil Bradley, Tillie. Would you mind if I introduced my friend Ethan Allan to you? Ethan, this is Tillie Blodgett!"

Of course Phil was doing this partly in fun, although he preserved a straight face. He saw the girl open her lips as if to say something, but she evidently did not think it worth while. So she just nodded her head in the haughtiest pos-

sible fashion toward Ethan, who finding that he did not seem to cut any figure in the proceedings held back and watched.

Ethan happened to be carrying the camera at the time, Phil having asked him to hold it while he tied his shoestring. And what did the clever Yankee do but take advantage of his position, and snap off a picture of Phil and the shore girl standing there in the sunlight.

Perhaps Tillie heard the slight "click" as the exposure was made. At any rate she dodged back a pace, and seemed disposed to close the door.

"If yuh got yuh drink meb'be yuh'd better be trampsin' along now. Dad he ain't likin' anybody tuh hang 'round *his* shack; and he shore might be comin' in any minit. I'd hate to have him tackle yuh w'en he's feelin' uppish!"

Phil himself had no particular desire to run across Blodgett when he was off his own ground, and trespassing.

"Guess we'd better be moving, Ethan, if you've had all the drink you wanted. And much obliged to you, Tillie, for your information. If we're going to be neighbors I don't see why we shouldn't be friends. Tell your father that Phil Bradley is one of the easiest fellows to get along with he ever met. Good day!"

She gave him another of those queer little quirks with her head. It was apparently the best she knew how to return a bow. Ethan was chuckling as the two of them walked away.

"Say, she's standing there in the doorway alooking after us right along, Phil," he remarked, as though greatly amused. "Did you ever see such a pretty girl so densely ignorant? Gee! when she talked in that way it sent a cold shiver through me. And yet I guess the boys down here think she's the princess. Fellows like Malachi for instance wouldn't pay any attention to what she said, so long as she looked as sweet as a Georgia peach. Their way of talking is the only style they know."

"So his name is Blodgett," mused Phil.

"And hers Tillie," added Ethan. "Do you know, Tillie was always a favorite name with me. I had a little cousin Tillie once that I used to be sweet on."

"Well, you want to keep away from the Blodgett shack if you know what's good for you," the other told him, at which Ethan shrugged his shoulders and replied:

"I'm not that big a fool, Phil. I've come down here to enjoy the sport, and not to waste my valuable time flirting. So forget it, please. Did you hear me shoot off your camera?"

"Yes, and thought you were pretty smart to do it, too. That was next to the last exposure on that roll of six, and I might develop the film as soon as we get back."

"Who do you suppose these Blodgetts are?" asked Ethan.

"Give me an easy one, won't you?" laughed Phil. "I never heard of them before, that I can remember."

"But there was a name on your map, and seemed to me it belonged to the owner of this ground next to yours, Phil?" expostulated the other boy.

At that Phil took out the aforesaid map and consulted it.

"It isn't Blodgett, but Tatum," he announced.

"Still, that map was made several years ago, before Mr. Putney died," remarked Ethan, shrewdly; "and lots could have happened since then. Mebbe the land has been sold several times. Blodgett might be the latest owner and a genuine neighbor of yours, Phil."

"Well, say what you will, Ethan, somehow I don't believe it. That shack was put up in a rush. They haven't even a well, or a spring, but depend on rain water in a barrel for drinking and cooking purposes."

"Huh! I warrant you there's a regular trail

over to *your* spring if you look, and that same Tillie's tramped it heaps of times," Ethan continued, skeptically.

"All right, I'm sure they're as welcome to all the water they want as to the air they breathe," declared Phil. "But the more this thing gets muddled up the more bent I am on finding out who and what the Blodgetts are. I'll learn even if I have to take a run in the *Skoot* to the nearest club dock, and make inquiries."

"Now, that wouldn't be a bad thing to do, come to think of it," agreed Ethan. "It stands to reason some of the guides, living around this region all their lives, would be apt to know about the man. He's a character if ever there was one."

"His daughter thinks so, at any rate," observed Phil.

"She certainly stands in considerable awe of the old man," admitted the other boy; "for she told us we'd better be 'trampsin'' before he came home, because he was a terror, and didn't like to have folks hanging around *his* ranch when he was feeling uppish!"

Both of the boys laughed again at the recollection of the quaint way in which the shore girl had put this warning.

"There's your blind on your point, Phil!" re-

marked Ethan, pointing, as they happened to come to an open spot, where a view could be had of the bay shore.

Just as it happened there was a little flock of ducks in the act of heading in toward the point, attracted by the decoys bobbing on the waves.

"Now, watch and see how he does it!" said Phil, clutching the other's sleeve.

The ducks were getting wary as the morning grew older, and they started to sheer off after coming within a long-range shot. Blodgett was on his job, all right, and did not mean to let the wild fowl get away without at least an effort to take his regular toll.

Up he sprang like a jack-in-the-box, and his gun was at his shoulder instantly. With the double report the boys saw one duck fall with a splash that told of sudden death, while another struck the water further away, to immediately dive out of sight.

"He's a dead shot, all right," admitted Phil. "That was all of seventy yards, I should think, and far enough for his ten-bore gun to carry. That one will get away, I suppose, for it's hard to make sure of a wounded duck. You can chase it all over while it dives. You see, they are so quick they go under at the flash of the

gun, and while your shot may strike all around the place, you miss."

"Yes, and I've heard that sometimes a wounded duck after being chased hard will dive to the bottom and seize hold of the eel grass, dying there and cheating the gunner; do you reckon that can be true, Phil?"

"I've had it happen myself, and they say it's a common occurrence," he was told.

They watched the little retriever swimming out to get the dead duck.

"There's the wounded one far out in the bay; now he's sunk again. There'll be no getting that smart bird!" said Phil, laughingly.

Blodgett still stood there in the blind.

"He's putting his game over the side, Phil, and looks to me as if he meant to give up the shoot for this morning. Guess the flight must be about over."

"Yes, there'll be another run just before evening, but not as good. And the law cuts off the late shooting, you know," Phil advised his comrade.

"Yes, he's made up his mind to quit the game for now. Gee! look at him tossing the ducks out, will you? He's exceeded his limit I should say, and must be shooting for the market. I'm glad of one thing, though."

"I can guess what you mean, Ethan."

"We didn't come away from that shack any too soon, eh, Phil?"

"Not if we wanted to avoid trouble," the other agreed; "but come, let's be moving along. I saw him look this way and he must have seen us. It's no pleasure to get into a wordy war with a man like Simon Blodgett, I should imagine."

"Huh! I wonder what he'll say when he starts to move out to your blind to-morrow morning, and we fling his own words about the early bird getting the worm back in his teeth," and Ethan shook his head as though he could easily imagine some things the giant shore man would say.

"I don't like to do it," Phil said, slowly, "but there's nothing else left for us to try unless we want to knuckle down to the big bully, and let him walk all over us."

"Not in a thousand years!" exclaimed Ethan, energetically; "that point is on your property, the blind was built by your keeper, and he's a trespasser, that's what. Why, you could have the law on him if you felt like it, Phil. And when you put it up to the old hog to take turns about in using your own property, you went more'n half way to keep the peace. No matter what happens the fault lies with that stubborn old rascal."

Evidently Ethan was for speaking out his mind first and last. He had been repressed up to then, and this explosion was the result.

"It may all come out right yet, even if things do look rocky just now," Phil continued, for he was hopeful by nature, a true optimist in fact, nearly always seeing the rainbow in the sky, and paying no attention to the shower that might cause a little inconvenience.

"He's loading himself down with his game now," remarked Ethan, as he took a last glance backward; "and you never saw such a sight. Why, he'll look like a walking market before he's through. Whee! I hope they come in like that when it's our turn to use the mutual blind."

"Yes, but remember, Ethan, that neither of us can shoot as well as Blodgett, who's been at it all his life, likely. We'll let more ducks get away than he does. And as we haven't a retriever we'll have to either wade after our dead birds or else use the little dinky in which we'll carry our stools over to the point."

"Gimme a fair chance," muttered Ethan, half raising his gun as he spoke, "and I think I can make good. It's all in knowing how to gauge the speed of a duck so as not to shoot too far ahead or in the rear. The rest lies with the gun, and I'm not ashamed of the tool I carry."

"None of us are for that matter," Phil told him, as he raised the camera and looked at it fondly: for he had taken some pretty fine pictures of wild beasts and little woods rodents in their home haunts, and never once could he blame a failure on the camera.

They were soon approaching the cabin that had already begun to seem like home to the four comrades, everything about it being so pleasant, and conducive to comfort.

"Listen!" exclaimed Phil, "what's all that shouting about?"

"It's Lub's voice for a cookey!" cried Ethan, as they both commenced to sprint toward the spot as fast as they could go.

Fortunately they could come within sight of the dock and the cabin before two dozen seconds had passed. What they saw caused them to stare at first and then commence to laugh.

Lub was in plain sight, out about ten yards from the shore, and up to his ample waist line in the water. Plainly he had been going out to the anchored launch in the dinky to get something, when in his clumsiness he had upset.

There he was, soaking wet, and towing the unruly little boat back toward the land, just as though he might be playing the part of Neptune coming up out of the sea.

CHAPTER VIII

WHAT THE PICTURES TOLD

“**P**HIL, get him for goodness’ sake!” gasped Ethan; “don’t let that beautiful picture be lost to posterity. You said you had one more exposure left on your film!”

“It’s already done, Ethan, so don’t worry,” the other told him.

“Isn’t it queer how Lub will manage to tumble over things?” continued Ethan, as they pushed along toward the scene of the accident; “none of the rest of us would ever think of upsetting in that punkin seed of a dinky; but the first time he tries to use it over he goes kerflop! If our guns had been aboard it’d be a nice job to salvage the same.”

Lub did not seem to be greatly put out by his accident. His face was red and rosy, and covered with a broad grin as he came ashore, dragging the righted water-logged dinky with him up on to the beach.

The first thing he did was to turn it over so that the water might run out; after which he

faced his chums, for X-Ray had long before this rushed to the spot.

"It isn't so *very* deep out there after all," said Lub, whose teeth were already commencing to rattle together, for the air was sharp, and the wind cutting to a fellow whose clothes were clinging to him.

"Well, next time try it out with the push pole, Lub," X-Ray told him, with considerable of sarcasm in his voice.

"Yes, it's a whole lot easier, Lub," added the unfeeling Ethan; "and besides, you don't have to dry out your clothes. I can see what a nice job you're going to have the rest of the day, and how our fine little cabin will smell of wet things."

"Beware of that treacherous little dinky after this, Lub," continued X-Ray; "it's a whole lot like an army mule, and has got a kick coming when you're not thinking about it."

"Oh! well, the bathing is fine, say what you will," expostulated the fat boy, "and besides I made an important discovery!"

"You did, eh?" sneered Ethan; "are you going in for giving exhibitions as the only human porpoise, at ten cents a head?"

"They're there, all right, oodles of them!" said Lub, mysteriously.

"Now what under the sun can he mean by saying that?" asked X-Ray.

"The shock must have gone to his brain!" declared Ethan gravely.

"Well, that same thing couldn't happen to either of you two fellows I reckon," Lub told them, calmly.

Phil saw that the stout chum really had something to say.

"What's that you've got in your hand, Lub?" he asked.

At that the other held it up.

"An oyster!" exclaimed X-Ray, delightedly, for he was unusually fond of the bivalves, and hardly knew the time when he had had enough of them.

"Sure thing," sang out Lub, although he was beginning to shiver by this time, "the whole bottom's covered with 'em. I tramped over thousands on my way in."

"They must have been planted by Mr. Putney, then!" cried Ethan, taking the oyster in his hand, and feeling in his pocket for his big knife, so that he could open the shell and discover what the contents looked like.

"We've got an oyster knife around somewhere!" stammered Lub, solicitously; and X-

Ray darted into the cabin to find it, for he happened to know where it lay.

"Now get in by the fire, and strip right away, Lub," ordered Phil; "or you'll be taking cold. With a coarse towel you must give yourself a good brisk rub-down so you'll glow all over. Then I'll have some duds for you to put on. Yours'll take pretty much all day to dry out."

Lub was only too willing to obey, for he must have been feeling very uncomfortable about that time.

"Anyway I thought of the dinky and the paddle the first thing, and nothing was lost, even if I did get soaked!" he told them exultantly, as he followed Phil toward the door.

They met X-Ray coming out with the necessary tool.

"Oysters!" he was exclaiming; "and at our very door, waiting to be gobbled. Lub, we owe you a heap for making such an important discovery. It's queer how so many of your misfortunes turn out to be blessings in disguise. I'm a regular oyster fiend, and I don't care who knows it."

Once inside the cabin, and while Lub was disrobing, Phil threw on plenty of pine wood, so that the fire might blaze up and diffuse a genial

warmth all around. Then he hunted up a coarse towel, and some clothes belonging to the stout boy.

"L-lucky we all t-thought to b-bring an extra s-s-supply of d-duds along!" stammered Lub, as he began to rub himself whole-heartedly with the crash towel.

"Yes, it was," Phil admitted, "because none of ours would be of much use to a fellow of your build. That's the way to do it, Lub; work it around your back by holding both ends and sawing right and left. Don't stop till you feel warm as toast. Then hustle into your clothes. I'll have a cup of hot coffee ready, and after you drink that there's no danger of you taking cold."

"Oh! this is nothing worth mentioning, Phil," remarked the other, in disdain; "so what's the use making such a noise about it? I'm all right. I guess I needed a bath, and the old dinky knew it too. Say, it just threw me out like I was a load of bricks. Something hit me, and I guess X-Ray was right when he said it kicked like an army mule."

Phil went outside presently.

Just as he expected he found the other two boys out in the dinky. They seemed to be working like troopers at something or other, and

presently Phil saw X-Ray haul up a dozen oysters on a bent stable fork he had found, and which was evidently intended to be used as a rake.

Phil walked down to the edge of the water and hailed the workers.

"How are they coming, boys?" he asked them.

"Just great, Phil!" replied Ethan, "no end to 'em, and such whoppers too. Here, try those and tell us what you think. You'll find the oyster knife over on the dock."

Accordingly Phil sauntered over, found where a plate of metal had been driven into the top of a pile to serve as a rest when oysters were being opened, and in another minute he was wrestling with the first bivalve.

Although not an expert Phil knew how to work the oyster knife, so that presently he had thrown the lid off, and saw that there was a fat, juicy looking morsel lying in the lower shell.

"How did it go?" shouted X-Ray, who must have been watching until he saw that Phil was engaged hurriedly on the second one.

"Gilt-edged," the wielder of the oyster knife assured him; "I never ate a better flavored one in all my life!"

"Hurrah!" cried X-Ray, "Ethan, don't you think we've got enough for a starter, and hadn't

we better go ashore to try just a few? I can't stand it much longer."

Apparently Ethan was of the same opinion, for the laden dinky headed shoreward, and Phil had just time to get his third one open when there was a demand for the oyster knife.

They were still at it when Lub came bustling out of the cabin, and headed toward the spot where the two boys sat, Phil having gone to develop his film in the daylight tank he always carried along with him on his various trips.

"Come this way, you public benefactor, and get a taste of the fine bonanza you discovered!" called X-Ray.

"See!" Lub told them, "it takes me to do things, once in a while. You fellows may laugh all you want to, but I manage to get there, you can't deny that. Oh! what a bouncer that one is. Do you mean for me to eat it, X-Ray? That's kind of you, I'm sure. I hope it goes down without a kick. Lots of things kick when you don't look for such a happening."

It evidently pleased Lub, for he hung around.

"Open me another one, please; I'm afraid I'll cut my fingers all to pieces with the sharp edges of the shell. It takes an expert to open oysters right; and you can do the job slick, I tell you, X-Ray."

"Listen to him giving me taffy, will you?" chuckled the tall boy; but apparently it had considerable influence upon him, for he continued to sit there and hand over opened oysters until Lub declared he could eat no more.

X-Ray thereupon decided that it was up to him to lay in another supply.

"No telling what might happen," he explained; "a storm could come up suddenly, and prevent us from harvesting our crop."

"Yes," added Ethan, "or else our big neighbor drop around after dark and clean out the stock we're depending on for our feasts."

"Where's Malachi?" asked Ethan, suddenly discovering the absence of the young bayman.

"Out yonder on the launch," X-Ray explained. "You see, we were looking over the decoys and found them in a pretty bad condition. Some had no sinkers attached to hold them where they were placed; others needed new cord, and there were lots of little repairs wanted. So Malachi said he'd stay out there and fix them all up. Then Lub took a notion he'd like to paddle out to watch how Malachi mended the stools; and after that the deluge."

"I only wish all accidents turned out as lucky as that one did," said Ethan as he smacked his lips.

Later on Phil came out again, having finished his work.

"How did they turn out?" asked Ethan.

"I think all of them are good," the other answered.

"Even the old man out in the blind, do you mean, Phil? And how about the snapshot I took of you talking to Tillie, eh?"

"Fortunately I don't appear to advantage in that, because my back was toward you, but Tillie's face is going to stand out as fine as it could be. The negative is a strong one. You did a good job there, Ethan. And you'll laugh when you see Neptune standing up to his waist in the water; it's great!"

"How long before they'll be dry enough for you to get a proof off?" asked the other; "I'm just wild to see what they look like."

"Particularly Tillie, eh, Ethan?" laughed Phil.

"Well, that was my handiwork, for I pressed the button, you know. Besides I c'n have a heap of fun with that picture, when I tell some one I know up home that's my cracker girl."

Along about lunch time there was a whoop from out on the launch.

"Malachi has finished his job, and is ready to come ashore," said X-Ray Tyson.

"You go after him, Lub; I'll 'tend your cooking while you're gone," remarked Ethan, carelessly.

"Like fun I will!" exclaimed Lub, indignantly; "how many suits of clothes do you think I brought along? My other one isn't dry yet. You won't get me near that kicking dinky again in a hurry, if I know it. Go yourself, Ethan."

So Ethan did, just as he had doubtless intended doing all along; and Malachi was brought ashore in time to join them eating the midday meal.

"How about the stools now, Malachi?" asked Phil as they sat around and enjoyed what had been prepared.

"I reckons you'll find the same all right now, suh," came the reply. "They sure was in a bad shape."

"We'll not do any shooting until morning," continued Phil; "then Ethan and myself expect to try our hands for a starter."

It had been agreed on between Phil and Ethan that they would say nothing of their adventure of the morning until a print of the old trespasser in the blind, and also one of the Blodgett girl at the neighboring shack could be displayed to the other astonished chums. That was how it came about there was no merry ex-

change of pleasantries among them as they ate, concerning the near presence of a pretty girl.

Afterwards the boys engaged in various little occupations, each according to his notion. Phil took a turn around to find out where he could set his camera trap on the coming night, with a chance to get a flashlight picture of some prowling Tarheel 'coon.

Later on he busied himself in the cabin, and Ethan knew full well that he must be printing pictures as proofs of his work, for he saw that he had a frame in the sun time and again.

Then Phil came toward the dock where all the others had gathered for some purpose or other. X-Ray and Lub looked at him expectantly, while Ethan grinned, knowing how surprised they would be when they saw the results of the little morning walk.

"Take a look at these, and tell me what you think, fellows; keep the sun off them, or they'll fade too soon," and with that he dropped the six prints into their midst.

Ethan instantly snatched up the proof of the picture he had taken.

"Say, she is a peach," cried X-Ray, who was looking over his shoulder; "wherever did you run across that chance to snap her off? She's the girl we saw last night, isn't she, Ethan?"

"That's right, X-Ray," replied the other, proudly; "I took that magnificent picture, I want you to know; and say, her name is 'Tillie!'"

When this remark was made, Malachi Jordan acted in a very queer way, first starting as though he had received a galvanic shock, and then eagerly fastening his eyes on the picture Ethan was holding, while his breath came quick and hard, and all the color had left his face.

Apparently Malachi liked to look at the picture of a pretty girl too, for although he made no remark he seldom took his eyes off the proof while Ethan was telling the other boys about what had happened to them that morning.

"We're going out in that blind hours before dawn to-morrow," he concluded by saying, "and hold the fort against every foe. If Simon Blodgett wants to get himself in a peck of trouble he'll try to rush that same blind. I'd just as lief pepper the old sinner as not. I reckon he deserves something like that, because he's got a voice like a fog horn, and has a lot of bullying ways about him that go against the grain. Why, you could see that even his daughter was dreadfully afraid of the old scalawag."

And although none of them saw it, Malachi's head nodded with every word Ethan said, as though he was ready to agree with the verdict.

CHAPTER IX

"FIRST COME, FIRST SERVED!"

MALACHI said nothing to indicate what he thought. Even when Ethan mischievously held up the picture of Tillie and asked him if he didn't think she was a sure enough "peach" the young bayman simply stared hard at it as though he could devour it, and simply replied:

"I shore does, suh, I shore agrees with yuh thar!"

"We'll have to keep an eye on Malachi, boys," said X-Ray, jokingly, "or he'll be stealing a march on us, and slipping over to Blodgett's shack to get acquainted. Still waters run deep they say, and I bet you Malachi is a great admirer of pretty girls around his home place."

"I'll leave the proofs with you, boys," remarked Phil; "only don't let them lie in the sun. When you get through with them put the lot between the leaves of this pamphlet I found in the cabin, and keep it where I can find it again."

"Where to, Phil?" asked Ethan, as though he more than half guessed.

"The afternoon is slipping away," Phil informed him, "and I thought that while the daylight lasted I might just as well get some of the best of those decoys packed in the dinky, and ready for our early morning trip. It'll be dark and cold then; and anyway I believe in fixing things up before you need them, when possible."

"Just my mind, and I'm going along with you!" declared the Yankee boy.

"I suppose we can manage with two of us and the stools, if they're packed right; because we'll have it that way in the morning," added Phil.

They had started off in the squatty dinky when Lub fashioned his hands into a crude resemblance of a megaphone and shouted after them:

"Be warned in time, Ethan, she kicks like everything when you're not expecting it. I ought to know! Treachery is in every plank of that dinky I do believe. Hope you've made your will before you started."

Of course the two afloat only laughed, and called back that they felt no fear.

"This dinky is only particular about her associations, that's all there is to it, Lub. Those she likes she keeps, and the rest she throws away."

Malachi had done his work well. Phil de-

clared he was a jewel when he saw the neat way he had left things.

"I'm more than ever inclined to keep him here right along, if we can come to terms, and he cares to stay," he told his chum.

Ethan, still a little cautious, was not quite so sanguine.

"They say a new broom sweeps clean, Phil; so I'd go a little slow about it. Not that I don't agree with you that Malachi seems to be all right. And since you've got to trust somebody with the care of your place down here, I guess it's six of one and half a dozen of another. But we'll know the man better before we quit the shooting box."

They managed to get as many of the decoys stowed away in the small boat as they thought they would need, and then made for the shore, where the loaded dinky was drawn up on the beach.

By this time it was getting along towards dusk, and since Lub's clothes were dried the interior of the cabin had resumed its normal appearance, and no longer gave the impression, as X-Ray said, of an "Irish wash-day!"

While Lub, assisted by Malachi, was getting supper ready, with the lamp lighted and the interior of the cabin looking very cheerful, Phil

had occasion to pick up the pamphlet in which he had told them to place the proofs.

They were all there but the picture of Tillie. He thumbed them over several times, smiling at the one showing Lub half immersed; "September Morn" Ethan called it; observing with satisfaction that which showed Simon Blodgett occupying the blind on Putney's Point; but looking in vain for the best of the lot.

"I suppose Ethan's cribbed it, to carry around with him, or else send up to the Brewster girl he's corresponding with," Phil laughingly told himself; "so what's the use of making a row? I can print another to-morrow if I want."

Malachi Jorden certainly was a man of few words; and yet it seemed to Phil he was fast losing the dejected expression that had been so noticeable upon his face when he first came into their midst. It may have been the fine food that he was enjoying, or else the cheery company of this pack of happy-go-lucky boys was having its effect on Malachi. Once Phil even saw a smile creep across his face, as if his thoughts might be unusually pleasant.

But Phil never suspected the cause of that satisfied look.

During the evening, after they had had supper, Phil and Ethan prepared everything

against their issuing forth early in the morning. They expected to get up before five o'clock, have a cup of coffee and a bite of some sort, and then paddle quietly to the point, where the stools could be put out according to which direction the breeze was likely to come from; since it is essential to have incoming ducks approach at a certain angle when about to alight.

Shells were examined and guns looked after.

"It'll be mighty cold work crouching there in that blind, let me tell you, Phil," Ethan remarked, and the other followed it up by adding:

"Put on your sweater under your coat and vest. These leather coats keep the wind out splendidly, you know. And be sure you've got your woolen mittens along. When it comes time to shoot it's easy to pull the right one off, and your hands are warm all the time."

"I guess we've about got everything arranged by now," Ethan concluded; and so they joined in the general conversation that was going on between Lub and X-Ray Tyson, with Malachi a good listener, never speaking unless asked a question about the habits of the people down along the shore, or else concerning the wild fowl to be shot all through the great Sounds of the Tarheel State.

They had no alarm clock along with them,

and Lub seemed very solicitous about the possibility of their oversleeping.

“It’d be too bad now if when you came-to, you found it already dawn,” he said, “because by then that Old Man Blodgett would be located for the morning shoot, and you’d feel cheap. I know I never could depend on myself to wake up until the sun came in my face.”

“There’ll be no trouble,” Phil assured him. “I’ve fallen into the habit of waking about when I want to. I just impress it on my mind before I go to sleep, and it seldom fails. To-night I’ll tell myself half-past four; and let’s see how it works.”

The cabin was wrapped in semi-darkness when some one was heard moving; then the lamp was lighted, though kept turned low, as though Phil did not want to arouse any of those who were not going.

He stepped over and shook Ethan, who was sound asleep. The other crawled out, digging his knuckles into his eyes, and yawning. Possibly just at that particular minute even such a devoted hunter as Ethan was asking himself whether it really paid to get up at such an unearthly hour, just to go out and knock over a few poor ducks. But after he got fully awake he was full of vim and enthusiasm.

A head was thrust from a lower bunk, and Lub's voice whispered:

"Was it half-past four, Phil?"

For answer the other made him look at the dial of the watch, when sure enough the time was then twenty-five minutes to five.

Ethan got the coffee on while Phil stepped out to see how the weather appeared. When he came back he said everything looked propitious for a good morning flight. Clouds were scurrying along, the moon had just set, and there was enough wind to keep the surface of the water stirred, which is always a good thing when wooden decoys are being used, with their painted backs apt to glisten in the sun, and warn away a few suspicious birds.

They drank their hot coffee with a few mouthfuls of food. Breakfast proper they would partake of when they came back an hour or two after sunrise.

So the two of them crept out of the door, guns in hand, and found that Malachi had the boat down by the water ready to launch from the dock.

"Wish yuh luck, suh!" he said, as they pushed off, and began to use the paddle, for the boat was propelled only in this manner unless one wanted to make use of a pole.

“Well, we’re not hoggish, Malachi,” Ethan told him, “like some people we happen to know. Half a dozen birds, or perhaps eight, ought to do for our crowd. Unless we happen to pick up a stray canvasback or redhead the ducks we’ll get aren’t the kind to make you want to eat them every single day.”

“They’ll be mostly teal, suh, I reckons, an’ mebbe a sprinklin’ o’ sprigtails an’ blacks ’mongst ’em. Leastways that’s how they runs down our way,” said Malachi, although they had already lost sight of him on the dark shore.

Phil was doing the paddling, while Ethan balanced the cranky little flat-bottomed craft, because there was always more or less danger that it would ship a few gallons of salt water on the windward side.

They followed the turns of the shore, keeping as close as was expedient. Often Phil would dip his paddle deep enough to touch bottom, with which fact he seemed to be satisfied.

It was certainly cold enough and disagreeable at that. The moon had gone down so that it was also very dark and forbidding.

“They say it’s often the darkest before dawn, and now I believe it,” said Ethan, as he strained his eyes to watch the shore line close at hand.

“We ought to be coming near the point I

should think; by now," ventured the paddler, casting a searching glance ahead, for he expected to see the land loom up in that quarter at any time.

"Whew! but it's cold and nasty," remarked Ethan.

"Duck hunters must always expect hard knocks and bad weather," Phil consoled his chum by saying. "You know the birds seldom fly when it's warm or pleasant. When a heavy wind stirs up the big bays it makes it hard for them to ride it out in the middle, so they scatter, and keep flying about. That's the time they see a bunch of their relatives having a picnic off some point, and drop in to join them, when up rises the hunter and lets fly. But keep quiet now, because we must be near the place, and our big neighbor might be ahead of us."

"There's the tongue of land leading to the point, Phil!"

After that it was easy to change their course and follow out the cape until they reached its further extremity. Here the ground was comparatively low, and offered a splendid location for a ducking blind. Indeed, if the history of what was then known as Putney's Point could be written up it would be found that literally thousands of wild fowl had been shot from the

blind that year after year adorned that place.

The boys first of all gently brought the little boat to the shore. Then securing it they climbed to where the blind could be seen, looking like a hump of rushes, or flotsam that had drifted ashore at some time or other.

“Nobody at home!” announced Ethan, after they had reached the spot; and perhaps there was a note of relief in his voice when he said this.

“I’m glad to know it,” Phil told him.

“Fust come, fust served, is weuns motto down heah. I got the blind, and I calculates on keepin’ the same!” said Ethan, giving a pretty clever imitation of the arrogant manner in which Old Man Blodgett had uttered those exact words.

“Well, you settle down here while I get the stool ducks out,” Phil told him.

“Can’t I help too?” demanded Ethan, who was always more than willing to do his fair share of the work, no matter what it might be, for he had never been known as a shirker.

“No, one can work better in that ferryboat than a couple, Ethan,” he was told, “and besides, I know more about tossing the decoys out than you do. They’ve got to lie across the wind in just a certain way, or we’ll miss a good many birds.”

"But what'll I be doing then, Phil?"

"Keep yourself as warm as you can, and hold the fort, that's all," he was told. "I'm hoping that if Blodgett does come he'll have the goodness to wait until after I get back again."

So Phil crept down to the dinky, pushed off, and paddled out to where he thought he should begin work.

He was not a great while in casting adrift his entire collection of decoys. They bravely rode the small waves facing toward the wind, and with one at the head. The boy had figured the distance as well as he was able in the darkness, and believed he had them within fair gunshot.

After that he paddled in and fastened the boat at a place where it would be out of the wind, and not apt to be noticed by any ducks flying across the point. Often duck hunters make use of garments made of dried rushes, so that their presence in the blind may not be discovered by fowl that come up from the land side.

Then Phil joined his chum, and the two of them crouched there waiting for the dawn to come. Already the first gray streaks were beginning to show in the heavens away off yonder beyond the broad, restless waters of Currituck Sound.

"It's coming," whispered Phil, as he directed the attention of his companion to these signs.

"Can't get here any too soon to please me," replied the other, who was shivering but more with nervous excitement than anything else.

"Hear that?" asked Ethan, as a strange whistling sound came to their ears.

"The first duck on the wing, and a whistler at that," he was told.

"I can see the decoys now, and looks like there might be a duck among them, Phil."

Both of them strained their eyes, for it was just getting daylight.

"I see him!" whispered Ethan.

He suddenly stood up in the blind; then there came a sudden flash, together with a report.

"Good shot!" cried Phil, highly pleased, when he saw the incomer drop like a plummet into the water close to the bunch of decoys; a second duck took wing, and Ethan, being quick on the trigger, laid him low also.

Then there came some loud language from the shore. Turning around they saw a man standing there shaking his gun at them threateningly. Of course it was Old Man Blodgett, coming to take possession of the blind again, and furiously mad to find that he had been fore-stalled.

CHAPTER X

DUCK SHOOTING FROM A BLIND

“**G**ET outen that blind, you-uns!” bawled Old Man Blodgett.

“Guess not, this morning; first come, first served!” called back Ethan, before Phil could get a word in.

“Better let me handle him, Ethan,” hastily remarked Phil.

“Well, I wanted to let him know we could give as well as take. What’s sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander too!” grumbled the other boy.

The big man on the shore was still standing there. He appeared to be turning the matter over in his mind, but Phil was relieved to notice that he did not attempt to rush headlong toward the end of the point, nor start to raise his ten-bore gun, as if tempted to commence shooting.

Had either of these things taken place there would have been a bad time of it, and their pleasure must come to an abrupt end.

While it was hardly to be expected that the

humorous side of the situation would appeal to Blodgett, at least the spark of sportsman spirit he must possess might be touched. He must see that these wide-awake Northern lads had beaten him fairly and squarely at his own game, and thrown back his very words at him.

Pretty soon he called out again.

"Air ye agoin' tuh clar out peaceably, er is thar agoin' tuh be trouble, I wants tuh know?"

"No reason why there should be any trouble," replied Phil, cheerfully. "One day the blind is at your disposal, the next one we claim its use. As it lies on my property that ought to be considered a very fair offer. You're a sportsman, Simon Blodgett, and I appeal to your sense of justice. We mean to use this blind while we're down here, half of the time. Now you can take that offer, or leave it. Suit yourself."

Phil was figuring on his knowledge of human nature when he said this. He believed he knew about what sort of a man this Blodgett must be, something of a boasting bully, a terror to his family, and yet possessing streaks of good in his make-up, if one only knew how to go about finding them.

An appeal to his nature as a sportsman might touch upon a weakness. Many of these pot-

hunters would like to be known by such a name, little though they merit the honor.

They could hear him talking to himself. Phil only hoped he would not keep this self communion up until he had worked himself into a fever heat, when caution was apt to be thrown to the winds.

"Come, Mr. Blodgett, look at the thing from our side as well as yours, and you'll not feel sore at us. Put yourself in our place. If you owned the blind, and offered to go shares with a neighbor I'm sure you'd think you were doing all that any one could ask. To-morrow morning we'll not bother you."

"I'll shore find a way to settle this business, let me tell yuh!" called the big man, and then he hastily disappeared.

"Now what in the dickens do you expect he meant by that, Phil?" asked Ethan.

"I'm sure I don't know," the other replied. "All we can do is to go on with our business. Load up again, Ethan, so as to be ready."

"Oh! I've done that long ago," the second boy admitted. "Just as soon as I heard Blodgett give tongue I hustled a brace of shells into my gun on the jump. Didn't know but what I'd have need of them if so be he took a notion to charge us."

"I'm glad he didn't," ventured Phil, glancing off over the dimly lighted water of the Sound, before sinking back of his covert.

"So am I, to tell you the honest truth, Phil. I'd hate to have to pepper anybody, or get a dose of shot myself. And I hope that when he cools off he'll come to look at things more reasonably. What can't be cured must be endured, you know."

"A good thing to learn, Ethan," chuckled the other.

"He may not want to actually try and drive us out by force, you see," continued Ethan, as though still troubled in his mind; "but there are other ways of making our position here what a military man would call untenable."

"Yes," added Phil, "and one of those would be in taking up his position somewhere, so as to blaze away every time a bunch of ducks started to come in to our stools. That's a cowardly scheme, and no one but a sneak would be guilty of it."

"Chances are you gave him that taffy about being a noble-minded sportsman just to keep him from getting down to tactics like those," ventured Ethan.

"You're a good guesser," his chum told Ethan, and then hastily added: "Hist! there they

come straight in at us! I'll give the word, and you take the left, while I look after the right."

Quite a bunch of teal had headed toward the point, seeing what looked like a family group enjoying themselves there. Sociability is what gets many men into trouble, and the same thing applies in the animal and bird circles.

"Now!"

As Phil gave the word both of them let drive. The teal were moving swiftly at the time. Something about the cheats on the water must have struck them as suspicious for at the last moment they had suddenly veered, as though about to flash aside. It was just then that Phil gave the anticipated word for action.

Phil got his bird but Ethan must have misjudged, for no result followed his first shot. He followed it up instantly with a second, and had the good fortune to drop the laggard of the little bunch.

The balance had gone off like a streak, so that Phil did not even find a good chance to pull trigger again. He was satisfied with the result, since there were now four birds floating on the water.

"Not so bad!" he remarked, as he stood up to see the better where the game lay.

Ethan was grumbling to himself.

"I don't see how I came to miss with that first crack, Phil. I'm sure I gauged the distance, and the flight of the birds O. K.; and yet I didn't knock even a feather out that I could see."

"Oh! in duck shooting you've got to take things as they come along," the other warned him. "In the first place they're tough birds, and their feathers screen them a whole lot, especially when they're coming head on. So, as a rule, we always let a duck get past us, when the shot can burrow in among his feathers better. But we have no kick coming, Ethan, with four birds already to our guns."

"How'd we better retrieve our game, Phil? Shall I drop into the dinky and pick 'em up right away?"

"No, better not," the other explained; "there's always a chance that you'll scare off others that are heading in this way. Besides, you can see that the ducks are floating toward the shore over there. As long as the wind holds where it does it is bound to wash them into the cove, where we can pick them up after the flight is all over."

"Just as you say, Phil; anything suits me."

As time went on one thing became evident; which was that Old Man Blodgett did not mean to interfere with their shooting.

"Guess he's figured it out that we'd retaliate to-morrow morning, if he did," Ethan observed later on, after they had managed to get several more shots, and dropped a fifth duck dead, while two had gone swimming away out of gunshot, with broken wings, a thing Phil deplored very much.

"That might explain why he's kept quiet, Ethan; but it'll also give the man a chance to think things over; and let's hope he sees that we're in the right. I don't want to have trouble with any man; at the same time no one feels like sitting still and being walked on."

A little later and the boys had another chance to do some good shooting, with the result that they got three big fellows out of a passing flock.

"And strange as it may seem," Phil declared with the greatest satisfaction, "I'm of the opinion that those last were real aristocrats."

"Not canvasbacks, Phil?"

"They looked like it to me, though as a rule you seldom strike one so near the shore, because they're deep water feeders. But we'll soon find out."

"Then you mean to quit for this morning, Phil?"

"Think of all our good resolutions, Ethan.

We're not game hogs, oh! no. Eight fat ducks ought to last us over until the day after tomorrow, I should figure. And when the wind shifted just for a minute then, I declare if I didn't get a whiff of coffee cooking."

"Oh! well, let's knock off!" agreed Ethan.

It was always an open question with Phil whether his chum had been most influenced by that appeal about good resolutions in limiting their bag; or the fact that the boys in camp must have breakfast about ready.

So first of all Phil went off in the dinky and collected the decoys, after which he paddled across to a spot where Ethan was waiting for him. The second hunter had engaged to pick up the ducks that had been wafted ashore, Phil securing several still afloat.

"How many did you find, Ethan?" asked the paddler, as the other came up.

"Five was all there were within reach," replied Ethan.

"Well, I have the other three, so we got them all. Here, Ethan, put them together. Isn't that a sight to please the eye of a sportsman? It's well worth coming all the way down here to feast on, don't you think?"

Of course there could be but one answer to

that sort of a question, and Ethan was enthusiastic over the result of their first shoot from a ducking blind.

When they entered the cabin and each held up four prizes the others were loud in their congratulations.

And during the eating of that jolly breakfast Phil and Ethan had to tell every minute detail connected with their morning experience. Lub and X-Ray Tyson were of course deeply interested in the way the surly neighbor had tried to drive them from the blind.

"But he'll learn by degrees that the Mountain Boys have got their eye-teeth cut!" Lub declared, stoutly; "and that if he knows what's good for him he'll treat our crowd with due consideration."

"Well, from the way he growled and talked to himself," Ethan continued, "I reckon Old Man Blodgett is getting ready to treat us to some sort of surprise."

Malachi, being a man of few words, simply listened to all that was said, and made no remarks.

The day wore on, and all sorts of things engaged the attention of the boys. Phil found that his camera trap had actually worked, for the bait was gone and the flashlight cartridge

had been burned, though none of them had happened to see a flash in the night.

He arranged to set it again in another spot which he had selected, and fix a cord so that a prowling animal would start things going.

Meanwhile Ethan had shouldered his gun and dared X-Ray Tyson to take a little saunter around with him.

"Got a hazy idea there might be a bevy of quail back in the woods yonder," he explained, "and for a change a few juicy birds along that line wouldn't come in bad."

The pair of them started out, and half an hour later those in camp heard distant shots that seemed to indicate they had stirred up game of some sort.

"All I hope is that they haven't run across the old man," Phil ventured to say; "because he's pretty peppery, and Ethan is as quick to get up his dander as my flashlight torch is to go off at the slightest temptation."

The two hunters came back in due time, and exhibited quite a tempting bunch of Bob Whites. They had gotten up a large covey, and by good shooting as well as some favorable conditions succeeded in decimating the bunch before they lost the scattered detachments later.

Malachi wandered in and out of the camp. He seemed strangely restless, Phil imagined, and this caused the other to wonder again what there might be connected with the young bay-man's past to haunt him so, and make him look as though he had lost his last friend.

"When he gets to know us better I'm in hopes he'll take a notion to tell us all about his troubles," Phil said to X-Ray Tyson, as they sat together, and the latter happened to mention that Malachi was acting queerly.

"Chances are the fellow is real homesick," X-Ray remarked, under the impression that he knew considerable about the ravages of this disease, since he had once suffered terribly from it when away from his folks, and marooned on a lonesome farm. "You know he as much as admitted that he came from down on Albemarle Sound. These crackers seldom travel, and mean as their shacks or log cabins may be they represent home to them, I've read."

"Yes, as the song goes, 'be it ever so humble, there's no place like home,'" Phil continued; "and it may be as you say, X-Ray. He certainly can't settle down to doing anything long, but must start out, and then show up again a little later. But I'm still banking on Malachi, and I think he's going to be the right man to

leave in charge down here when I'm gone."

"He keeps things looking clean, Phil, I will say, and that means a heap," admitted the other.

"It does with me, X-Ray. After you get into the habit it becomes second nature with any one, and they do things without thinking about it. I'm having the time of my life to get that same idea in Lub's head, for he has been waited on too much at home, and they spoiled him. But Lub's so good-natured you can't get mad at him; and I have hopes he can be cured."

Ethan was getting in more oysters, of which there seemed to be an unlimited supply. From the empty shells found in a pyramid near by on the shore, and but recently opened, Phil was of the opinion that Old Man Blodgett must have been helping himself to the stock day by day, as the humor seized him.

"Perhaps it was the idea that he must forego his daily feast, since we had come down, that was the main cause for his temper towards us," he suggested to Ethan, as he sat down.

"But he broke out that evening we came near running into his old launch, you remember," protested the other. "No, I think he's a bad egg, if ever there was one; and I'm wondering what he's got in mind right now, to make us sorry we ever crossed his will."

CHAPTER XI

THE NIGHT ALARM

THAT night as they sat around the fire Phil and Ethan fell to discussing Old Man Blodgett again. The latter found it hard to believe such a man could have even one spark of good in him, and Phil felt that he ought to do a little missionary work at home.

"First place, Ethan," he started in to say, "you'll have to admit that he didn't try to spoil our shooting; neither did he step around to that cove and pick up any of our game that washed in to the shore."

"That's all right, but he had some good reason for keeping shy of such things, I take it, Phil. The old man knows enough not to burn his fingers. He's got horse sense. But like as not he's figuring right now on keeping us out of that blind the next time, if he has to bunk in it all night."

"We'll wait and see," said Phil, calmly. "I didn't tell you that I purposely left that patent foot warmer we had with us out there, did I? It's still well charged, and if the old man's got

a bit of gumption he'll know enough to put a match to it, and be comfortable while he squats there. It's a terribly cold job sitting in a blind without moving, and your blood gets chilled, so that you shiver to beat the band."

"And you really expect to see that contraption again, do you, Phil?" asked the other, staring dubiously at his chum.

"I certainly do, whether he uses it or not. I'm playing a game, Ethan, and that comfy footwarmer is the bait. I'm banking on human nature, and the grain of sportsman spirit I fancy Old Man Blodgett has got in him."

"Well, I'll be interested to know how it all comes out," muttered Ethan, but at that his face told he did not put a great deal of faith in the venture.

The night passed without anything happening that could be called out of the way. Phil was the first one up on the following morning, and it was hardly sunrise as he started the usual racket with a spoon on a fryingpan, to get the rest stirring.

Lub was the worst offender, for he did love to snuggle down in his warm blanket. But he knew the others would be dragging him out by the leg if he tried to "soldier," so he too came crawling forth.

Malachi was getting the fire going nicely when they heard the sound of a gunshot, and almost immediately afterwards came a second report.

"He's on deck bright and early, you see!" exclaimed Ethan, with a laugh.

"Well, why not, when this is *his* day in the blind?" Phil added, without showing the least feeling. "And none of us will dream of interfering with his sport, for he kept clear of us yesterday all right."

"Do you really think he'll throw up the sponge, and give in to us?" asked Ethan.

"Some of us will start out to the point tomorrow morning about the same time," he was told, "and I wouldn't be surprised if Blodgett didn't show up at all. Still I may be mistaken. No one can say for certain what will happen; only I've made my bid, and that's all I expect to do."

Phil found on investigation that his camera trap had not met with success during the preceding night, and so without saying anything to the rest he decided to change its position later in the day.

He believed he knew of a good spot where he would be more apt to get results. It lay part way between the cabin and the adjoining

property, where a well beaten trail led through a patch of woodland.

Along about noon Phil slipped off again. This time he took the dinky, and paddled across to the point where the blind lay.

Of course he expected that the occupant had left it hours before, since there was little likelihood of any considerable shooting along in the middle of the day, unless a storm came along that would stir things up lively.

Landing, he secured his boat, and then made his way to the blind. Instead of being torn down and partly destroyed, as Ethan had hinted he might find it, to Phil's delight he could see that the experienced old duck-shooter had even done some considerable repair work on the shelter before quitting the same.

Once Phil clambered inside and he felt a glow of satisfaction. The foot warmer was there as he had left it, though the oil had been exhausted, showing that Old Man Blodgett had accepted the invitation to make use of the contrivance.

"And here's a little low stool he's been in the habit of fetching over to sit on," Phil told himself, with a chuckle; "he didn't leave *that* behind when here before, but this time it's different. Perhaps he wanted to do a little something

as a return favor for using our foot warmer."

The very idea gave the boy solid satisfaction, and he was laughing to himself as he proceeded to fill the reservoir of the foot warmer once more with oil, having been wise enough to carry a supply along with him, which was one reason for his using the dinky instead of walking around.

"I guess we're fetching him, all right!" was what Phil was telling himself; and really it began to look as though he did know a little more with regard to human nature than Ethan.

When he reported all this the others debated the matter pro and con. Ethan could not yet decide that such a savage old man had a grain of decency in his composition; and Phil told several accounts of others who had seemed to be just as surly and unlovable, and yet when the supreme test of manhood came they had willingly laid down their lives for others.

"There was that story of Hays about Jim Bludsoe, the pilot of the Mississippi River packet," he explained. "I suppose he was as tough as they make them, and could swear like a pirate; yet when the boat took fire Jim stayed by the wheel in the pilot-house with the flames all around him, and held her 'against the bank till the last galoot had gotten ashore.' And then he gave up his life. It doesn't always

pay to judge from outside appearances. Circumstances gloss over the real nature of a man; and it is only when some violent eruption comes that he breaks through the shell to show his genuine character."

Ethan appeared to be somewhat impressed by all this talk. Still he was rather stubborn, and hard to convince. As a rule Ethan played the part of a Doubting Thomas, and was always wanting to be "convinced" by actual touch or sight.

Lub had given them a splendid oyster-stew at noon. They had plenty of the unsweetened kind of condensed milk, which served admirably in place of the fresh article. He also declared his intention, if he could get Ethan to open more of the shellfish, to treat them to fried oysters that evening; for when once Lub got started along culinary lines he was hard to head off.

"Do you think we could have a chance to get out after geese or swan while we're down here," Ethan asked some time later, as he and Phil cleaned their guns afresh.

"That's something I've been figuring on doing," the other replied. "I've asked Malachi about it, and he told me that he knew where we'd have a chance to bag some brant and perhaps geese or swans, if we felt like taking the launch

and going off for a couple of days—say you and Malachi and myself, leaving the others to keep house while we were gone.”

“But, Phil, I thought Malachi came from away south somewhere?”

“Yes, he does, I understand, on the big Albemarle Sound; but then he’s been a guide to sportsmen on occasion, and in that way boated all over the waters along the North Carolina shore.”

“Oh! that’s how it comes, then,” observed Ethan, “and like as not he knows all about Currituck game preserves and where you can shoot brant and geese without getting in trouble with clubhouse keepers?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if Malachi did know all about such things, Ethan. Now I think it’s only right the others should have a show at the shooting, if they feel disposed that way, don’t you?”

“Sure, take X-Ray Tyson along with you in the morning and let’s see how many ducks he’ll bag—that is, if you get a chance to lie in our blind. As for Lub, he doesn’t care much about shooting a gun, and would rather hang out near the grub pile. How he does love to have me open oysters by the dozen. Say, I tried to make

him tell me he had enough, but it was more'n I could do. His appetite keeps on increasing the older he grows."

"Well, the supply is inexhaustible, which is one comfort," laughed Phil.

"What's all this mysterious confab going on here about?" asked X-Ray, coming over to where the two were sitting on the bench, having finished the operation of putting their guns in good condition.

"Phil was saying that you are to take the next crack at the web-feet, from the blind to-morrow morning," Ethan informed him.

"Glad to hear it!" the third boy declared, though of course his enthusiasm was not to be compared with that which Ethan usually showed, because the latter had always been wild over sporting matters.

"You want to get everything ready before you crawl under your blanket to-night," Ethan continued, "because it's no time to arrange things when you're shivering in the cold long before daylight on a winter morning."

"I'll be sure to see to it, I promise you," X-Ray declared.

"And if he doesn't I will," added Phil; which convinced Ethan there would be no detail

omitted, for he knew how thorough Phil always was when it came to making preparations ahead of time.

"How about those oysters, Ethan; do we get them shucked this afternoon?" sang out Lub just then.

"I'll go right out and tackle the job now," replied the other, as he placed his gun in a corner, and picked up the steel knife with which the bivalves were opened.

"And I'll help you," declared X-Ray. "How silly not to have fetched plenty of openers along. But next time I'll know better. Here's something that can be used to do the business, even if it is kind of clumsy. I might manage to get one shucked while you do two; though that ought to lighten the job."

They went out with a tin pail between them, and started in at the great pyramid of shellfish which had been heaped on the dock by each of them taking a turn with dinky and oyster tongs.

Phil meanwhile slipped away with his camera and the flashlight contrivance, meaning to set his trap in the new place. He did not think to mention it to any of the rest, not believing it would make any difference.

They had heard nothing from the neighboring shack all through the day. While he was set-

ting his camera and the trap Phil could catch occasional glimpses of a fire through the brush and trees.

"I didn't know I was so close to his place," he told himself; "but it's too late to change things now. Not much danger of him wandering this way while we're down at the cabin."

So he completed his arrangements, and left the spot just as the gloaming was coming on. The last look he took he still noticed the fitful flash of the fire in front of Old Man Blodgett's shack; and perhaps Phil also imagined he could see the form of Tillie, she of the pretty face and big gray eyes, flitting back and forth as she prepared their simple meal, as the shack did not seem to have a chimney, or a fireplace inside.

Lub's efforts to please turned out to be a huge success. Every one of the other boys vowed there never had been such splendid fried oysters as the dish he set before them that night.

"That's because I tried out a lot of the fat salt pork," explained the pleased cook, "rolled each oyster in cracker crumbs, and then soused it in while the fat was bubbling hot. It got coated with brown in a hurry, and yet the oyster itself is as tender as anything. I think myself they are passable."

"They are the best thing you ever did for us,"

X-Ray told him, as he started in for his second helping.

As he had promised, X-Ray went about getting everything ready for his anticipated early morning "prowl," as Lub termed it; for the fat chum could not understand how any sensible person would forego that lovely early morning sleep for the sake of sitting shivering in a duck blind, and firing a few shots at the poor innocent things. But then Lub did not have the red blood in his veins that the others were always boasting about. The solid things of life appealed more to Lub.

Phil, as before, said he would attend to the getting-up part, and that it would be five o'clock this time instead of half an hour earlier, since he and Ethan had been ready for the ducks long before they were stirring.

"Evidently you are not counting on some one else getting up ahead of you," Ethan was heard to say, rather skeptically; he was undoubtedly referring to Old Man Blodgett, but Phil did not take up the gauntlet and enter into a discussion, for he fancied that that subject had been argued threadbare.

Once again silence reigned in the cabin. Malachi was huddled in his blanket on the cot, and seemingly fast asleep long before some of

the others, for he did not stir, or make the slightest sound.

The fire burned low on the hearth, and by degrees it would get darker as time passed. From outside came the familiar sounds to which the boys were now well accustomed, for they had the window open a little way so as to secure fresh air.

Phil lay there thinking. At first his mind dwelt on distant subjects, the people of the home town so far away to the north. Then by degrees he found himself wondering how their difficulty with their crabbed next-door neighbor would come out, and if Old Man Blodgett could be won over by kindness where harsh means would only have started him on the road of retaliation.

After that Phil thought of Malachi, and he tried in vain to figure out what it could have been that had sent him away from his home down on Albemarle Sound. He even remembered something the other had said about some person seeing that he did amount to something after all.

And then Phil dropped off while he had this puzzle still unsolved upon his mind.

He did not know how long he had slept when he was aroused by an outcry; though on the

spur of the moment when awakened Phil could not determine whether it had actually been a cry or a figment of his imagination, caused by dreaming. He sat bolt up in his bunk, and promptly banged his head against some beam. While he was rubbing his head ruefully he heard the others stirring, and then there was a hurried movement as if one or more of them might be hastily clambering out of their bunks.

So Phil also jumped to the floor.

"It was outside, Phil!" cried Ethan, fearfully; "gee! such a wild yell, too!"

"Get some clothes on, and we'll take a look around!" called Phil, as he started dressing.

CHAPTER XII

PHIL'S PLAN BEGINS TO WORK

“**W**HATEVER could it have been?” burst from Lub, as half-dressed the lot of them poured through the doorway, and reached the open air.

So far as they could see there was nothing amiss. The moon was obscured by clouds, but it was not actually dark by any means; it never is when the moon is of any size, no matter how heavy the clouds may be that cover the heavens.

“Why, even Lub heard it, so we couldn’t have been mistaken!” exclaimed Ethan.

“What do you think of that!” cried X-Ray, as though he considered it next door to a miracle that the heavy sleeper had been aroused.

“Ho!” burst out Lub, indignantly, “I was awake at the time, I want you to know. I had just been dreaming about three red and green alligators that were trying to steal all our fine grub here, and which I had bravely started to jab with that oyster rake, when all at once there was a shout that gave me a cold chill. I thought

one of the said alligators had grabbed a chum of mine."

"What did the noise sound like, Lub?" asked Phil, knowing that as the rest had been aroused from a sound sleep, just as he was, they were hardly in a condition to tell much about it.

"Why, it was a yell!" admitted Lub.

"Do you mean the kind of yell a man would give; or such as a tiger or a panther might let out if startled?" continued the other.

"Holy smoke! you don't mean to tell me there are wild animals like that hanging out around your ranch down here, do you, Phil?" faltered Lub, whose knees must have begun to knock together at the very thought of such a thing.

"No, I don't believe any such thing; but answer my question," Phil insisted.

"Oh! I guess it was like a man shooting off his whoop. He hollered about like any one would that had been suddenly stung by a yellowjacket; and you all know how that is."

"You mean as if he'd been surprised in some way; or else another man had hit him over the head; is that it, Lub?" Phil continued to ask.

"Might have been that way," admitted the other; "but, Phil, could a fellow shout out if he'd been struck by lightning, tell me that?"

"Not as a rule," Phil assured him; "because

they don't know what strikes them. They see the flash, and that's the end with them. I never heard of anybody even giving a groan when a bolt hit him. But why do you ask that, Lub?"

"Oh! because I saw the flash of lightning all right!"

At that both Ethan and X-Ray began to laugh.

"Hear the innocent talking about lightning when the mercury is away down below the freezing belt!" jeered the former.

But Phil did not seem to think that it was so very absurd.

"You saw the flash after you heard the cry, did you say, Lub?" he asked.

"Oh! I couldn't be sure; they may have come together for all I know," replied the fat chum, helplessly; "but I did see the light through the window there; I'll stake my word on that."

Phil now started to laughing on his own account.

"What ails you now?" demanded Ethan; "where does the fun come in, tell us, so we can laugh too. I'm commencing to shiver out here, let me tell you."

"I think I know what happened," said Phil.

"Then tell us, please," pleaded Lub.

"It was my camera trap that did it," the other

told them; "the flash was the cartridge going off in regulation style. Some animal, or else some person, ran against the cord, and set it going. And Lub here thought it was the lightning."

"Well, what d'ye know about that now?" exclaimed X-Ray Tyson, appearing to be rather tickled over the matter; "and say, Phil, if that's so mebbe when you come to develop your film you can tell pretty close what sort of a critter it was ran on to your cord, can't you?"

"Perhaps so," replied Phil, "but I was just looking for Malachi."

"I'm heah, suh," said the bayman, starting toward them; and Phil noticed that Malachi must have stopped a little longer to dress than the rest of them.

"Did you hear the cry too, Malachi?" asked Phil.

"I shore did, suh," the other immediately replied.

"And would you think it was a man who shouted, Malachi?"

"Hit mout a ben jes' so, suh; seems likely!" came Malachi's answer, which was the only expression of opinion the bayman would venture to give.

"I move we get in out of this and warm up!"

ventured X-Ray, shivering as if he had been sitting on a cake of ice.

Everybody seemed willing enough; indeed, there was no use of their staying out there in the cold night air any longer. No matter what caused the sound by which the whole camp had been awakened they would not be getting any nearer a solution of the mystery by freezing themselves.

"I've heard there are wild marsh ponies that wander along the beach down here," Ethan ventured to say, as they sat around the revived fire warming up, before trying for another spell of sleep.

"Yes," Phil went him one better, "and I've read accounts that told how they even lived partly on fish, although that's something I'd have to see before I believed it. But did you mention that, Ethan, meaning you figured one of those ponies could have run against my cord and set the flashlight off?"

"I don't know what to think," the other told Phil; "it might have been a screech or it may have been the neigh of a startled horse. Something woke me up, and that's all I can say."

After the fire got to going good and strong the heat made them feel drowsy. Gradually

the talk fell off until one by one the boys crept over to their several bunks and crawled in under the blankets.

It was lacking an hour or more to midnight when Phil, being the last one up, blew out the lamp and sought his bed. Malachi was sound asleep, and from the various sounds welling forth from the other bunks it seemed as though the balance of the boys had not been long kept awake by the recent happening.

This time it was X-Ray who felt himself gently shaken.

"Five o'clock, and time to get up, duck hunter!" came in Phil's quiet tones.

They tried to keep as still as possible, so as not to disturb the rest if it could be avoided. As before a hot cup of coffee was about all they wanted, meaning to return in time for a late breakfast.

This time Lub did not thrust his head out from his lower bunk and ask about the time, for doubtless the stout boy was in imagination many hundreds of miles away from the shooting-box on Currituck Sound, and dreaming of home.

Making sure that they had forgotten nothing the two crept out of the cabin and started for the dinky. The decoys had all been stowed carefully in one end of the squatty little boat,

as on the previous occasion; and as practice makes perfect Phil had learned how to take up less room with the lot; also how to pick each one up and toss it overboard without getting the cord and sinker entangled.

The conditions were much the same as on the other morning, and it was Phil's opinion, freely expressed, that they ought to have at least a fair measure of success in so far as the shooting went.

X-Ray had insensibly become a little impressed with some of Ethan's skepticism. He showed this by saying as they worked the dinky around to the dock, from which it could be more easily entered:

"What will we do if he happens to be settled there, and warns us to keep off, Phil? Would you take the chances of trying to push in on him?"

"Why, hardly that, X-Ray," the other told him. "It would be silly of us to dare an angry man to open fire. He might press a trigger without hardly meaning to, but the result would be tough on us."

"Then you'd give up the idea of getting into your own blind; is that what you mean, Phil?"

"For to-day, yes. But don't think for a minute, X-Ray, I'd give up the fight. I'm not

built that way. If he refused to accept my fair terms my plan would be to watch and see when he left the blind; and then after that two of us would occupy it off and on continuously. Old Man Blodgett would get no more chances to shoot from Putney Point while the Mountain Boys were down here."

X-Ray heaved a sigh of relief.

"I'm glad to hear you talk like that, Phil," he declared. "Honest to goodness I was afraid that you might be thinking of caving in, and letting him ride rough-shod over us all."

"But things haven't come to that pass yet, X-Ray."

"We'll soon know about that, I guess," the doubter continued, as though not yet willing to admit that he had as much faith as Phil seemed to possess in Old Man Blodgett showing a streak of decency after all.

"Malachi is a light sleeper, for he was up almost as soon as I began to move," remarked Phil, thoughtfully.

"Yes, and mighty willing to do everything he could to help out, for he got the coffee to going, after fixing up the fire!" added X-Ray Tyson, who was already commencing to "hedge" with regard to his opinion of the stray who had

come to join them in such a strange fashion, and really through a case of "cramps."

"And yet he seemed to sleep harder than any of us at the time we rushed out of the cabin," continued Phil; "for his blanket was not thrown back when I passed by on the way to the door."

"But he joined us afterwards, you remember," expostulated X-Ray, not seeing beneath the surface of what Phil was remarking; "he only stayed longer so as to get more duds on."

"Yes, that's a fact, isn't it, he *was* fully dressed when I talked with him. But you never would have thought Malachi was the sort of a fellow to bother whether he had anything on more than a pair of trousers when in a hurry. Now, step in, and I'll do the paddling. Careful now, X-Ray, or we'll do worse than Lub; for at least he had the good sense to try the bathing in the daytime. It would be a heap colder at an early morning hour like this."

Duly impressed with the necessity for caution, and not being desirous of taking a bath at such an unseemly hour, X-Ray managed to stow himself away in the bow of the tender. Here he coiled his long legs under him and did his best to balance the boat.

"It's just such a morning as Ethan and I

had," whispered the paddler, as they set out smoothly, keeping not a great distance from the shore.

By this time Phil had gotten his bearings, and was beginning to feel quite at home around his Southern property. Accustomed to impressing distances and local land-marks on his memory he was capable of moving in the dark, once he caught his bearings.

Nevertheless it would have been folly to drift so far away from the shore that neither of them could see the dim outlines. If nothing more it meant a useless paddle; and should they become confused they might lose the advantage an early start gave them.

"I can see the point making out there, Phil!" muttered X-Ray, after a time; for his vision was beyond the average.

Soon Phil too was able to say he saw where the tongue of land extended into the Sound. It was pretty dark, for the moon was below the horizon again, though in a couple more nights they could expect it to be full, when it would rise at sundown and last until about dawn.

Even Phil was willing to confess to himself that he felt considerable interest in what the outcome of their early morning jaunt was going to be. He could feel his heart beating

much faster than customary as the little boat drew closer to the end of the point.

He purposely splashed the water more or less. X-Ray thought he was growing a bit careless, but it was not so. In fact, Phil wanted to give fair warning that they were coming. If Old Man Blodgett had forestalled them, and was crouching there in the duck blind, it was better that he be made aware of their approach. Then he could roar out, and warn them to sheer off under penalty of being greeted with a shot.

No loud hoarse voice bawled out. The waves lapping the shore, and the whine of the night wind through the pines further back—these sounds alone came to the strained hearing of the two lads as they drew nearer to the tip of the cape.

"If he's there he keeps mighty still, don't you think, Phil?" whispered X-Ray, awed possibly a little by the excitement attending their approach to the zone of danger.

"I haven't heard a sound up there so far," remarked Phil, purposely speaking in his natural tone, so that even a deaf man must have heard his voice, especially at such close quarters.

Still nothing but silence. It began to look as though they were not going to be bothered with the old man; and yet Phil could not help re-

membering that obscure threat which he had made before leaving the beach on that previous morning at peep of dawn: "I'll shore find a way tuh settle this business, let me tell yuh!"

As they pushed in to land Phil kept his teeth close shut. He was prepared for almost any sort of a surprise, although hoping for the best.

As before he secured the boat temporarily, for if all was well he expected to engage to place the stool ducks about as on the former occasion, for the wind was in exactly the same quarter.

"Fall in behind me, X-Ray, and climb!" he said, simply.

X-Ray saw immediately what Phil meant to do, and being an impetuous fellow as well as brave, he was determined that he would not allow Phil to take all the danger on his shoulders. So when he pushed on it was alongside the other, who of course could not force him to keep to the rear.

The blind now loomed up ahead of them. Another ten seconds would decide the matter one way or another. Together the two boys crept on, and then arose to climb over the low part of the duck blind, which was on the shoreward side, of course.

"Phil, he isn't here!" gasped X-Ray, in sheer

exultation, when they found that the blind was quite empty.

Phil laughed softly as though hugely tickled.

"It certainly looks, **X-Ray**," he remarked in a satisfied tone, "as if we had won Old Man Blodgett over to a sort of truce, anyway. My way was best after all. The sun was stronger than the wind in bringing him to time, and I'm glad!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE STRANGE ACTIONS OF MALACHI

“**P**ERHAPS he overslept himself, Phil?” suggested X-Ray Tyson, after he had allowed a sigh of positive relief to pass his lips, for he secretly dreaded having trouble with Old Man Blodgett.

“Well, that’s hardly likely,” replied the other, as he divested himself of numerous burdens, including the shotgun; for he had work before him in setting out the stool ducks so as to make an attractive looking spread.

“Phil, did you come late this morning on purpose?” demanded X-Ray, suspiciously.

“To be frank with you, I did,” was the reply.

“But why, Phil?”

“I wanted to give him a fair chance to get in the blind, if he really meant to beat us to it,” Phil admitted, unblushingly.

“That’s queer, I should say,” X-Ray muttered.

“You don’t understand just what I mean,

X-Ray. I hate to beat around the bush, as you happen to know. I wanted to find out whether Old Man Blodgett had made up his mind to be a bit neighborly, or whether it was going to be war to the knife between us all the time we were down here."

"Oh! now I'm beginning to see what you were hitting at, Phil. And if we had found him in possession this morning, what then?"

"This was to be our morning's shoot, according to the terms I offered him, you remember, X-Ray?"

"Yes."

"Well, it would have been war to the knife then," Phil continued. "I'd have been bent on shutting him out of the use of this blind as long as we were down here, even if some of us had to hold the fort, day and night, so as to be in possession, and put the responsibility of starting the racket on Blodgett."

"And because he hasn't come out here this morning you think he's softening, do you, Phil?"

"I'm pretty sure of it," was the quick answer. "When I came over yesterday to fill the reservoir of the footwarmer with kerosene oil, and found that he had made use of it, and also left this stool behind for us to sit on while waiting

for ducks to come in, I got an idea my policy was winning out. Now I know it."

"Bully for that, Phil. I hope I'm no coward; but say, I'd hate to have a fight with that big bayman. He's sure a terror, if his looks and bull voice go for anything."

"Well, I must be going now, X-Ray; you stay here and watch."

"You mean to pitch the decoys out, don't you?" asked the second boy.

"I mean to locate them in a selected place," Phil replied, meaningly. "It's no haphazard thing, this fixing your stool so as to have the ducks come in and give you the best kind of a shot. You've got to take a lot of things such as wind, and currents into consideration, if you want the best results."

"I reckon so, Phil; but you see I don't pretend to know much about shooting ducks from a blind. I'm learning new things every day and hour."

"And when it can possibly be arranged," continued the other, as he prepared to set forth on his errand, "it's always best to have it so the rising sun won't dazzle your eyes, and keep you from seeing low-flying birds heading in. Yes, there's a heap to learn that can be only picked up through actual experience. Once you've

done these things yourself, and they're not apt to ever be forgotten."

So Phil paddled softly out, and finding the proper distance for the decoys, as on that other morning he commenced dropping them over. Each had a cord, attached to a small staple driven into the wooden breast of the imitation fowl; and at the other end of this cord was a leaden weight, or sometimes a piece of iron, according to the whim or poverty of the party owning the decoys.

A few of these wooden stools were of the "bought" variety, but others showed the handicraft of the owner of the launch which Phil had hired up in Norfolk. They were pretty clever imitations of the real thing, and answered the purpose for which they were used admirably.

Phil of course had profited somewhat from his experience on the first shooting morning, and in various ways believed he could better the placing of the decoys. He had also shortened the cords so that the floats would not have such a chance to swing, as the water was quite shoal at that spot.

Back to the blind he hurried, for already the light was beginning to show over the Sound, and in the east, telling that it must be fully six o'clock, with dawn about to break.

They talked in low tones when it was necessary to exchange any words; but most of the time they spent in simply keeping the best look-out possible.

The light gradually grew stronger, and X-Ray remarked how lovely the dimpling waves appeared in the odd gray of the breaking day.

Several times they could hear that thrilling sound of quick acting wings close to the surface of the water, and which would remain long in the memory of X-Ray, who was having his first real experience at this type of duck shooting.

"Sounds mighty much like a whistle, Phil!" he remarked once, when he listened to this peculiar sound.

"That duck is one most baymen do call a Whistler," the other told him. "There is some odd formation to its wings that causes it to make that sound when near the water. I don't know that it would be the same if the fowl flew high and swift. Keep still, X-Ray!"

Of course the other knew from those last words that Phil must have sighted the first duck heading in toward their stools. And three seconds later X-Ray himself could see the expected victim coming low-down, and apparently only desirous of joining the happy bunch

that nodded cheerily on the little waves close to that quiet looking point.

"You take him, X-Ray," whispered Phil; "and fire when I give the word. *Now!*"

Of course Phil's only object was to drill his chum in the start, for it requires more or less experience and good judgment to decide when a swift-flying duck has come within decent range of the blind.

X-Ray, while not the enthusiastic hunter that Ethan claimed to be, could handle a gun with fair ability. No sooner had Phil given the word than he pressed the trigger, and held himself ready to follow with the left barrel in case the first failed to do the business.

There was no necessity for a "repeat." That duck splashed in the water the instant the report sounded, and never moved again.

"Good work, X-Ray!" commented Phil; "try to judge of distances, and how fast the birds are flying. By degrees you'll get on to a whole raft of things that are necessary to make a successful duck-shooter. Any fellow who can stop a fowl that is flying past at the rate of a mile a minute perhaps can count himself in the swim."

It was not long before other ducks began to feel the temptation to become sociable with the

merry lot at the point; they seemed to be so happy there, that the feed must be extra fine. Sometimes they got away again with a bad scare, or one of their number wounded; while again they paid tribute to the accuracy of the young Nimrods' ability to shoot straight.

Of course X-Ray made some bad shots, but Phil told him that was to be expected, and that he should not feel discouraged, since ducks were the most difficult of flying targets, and no man ever used a dozen shells of a morning but that he had some misjudgments scored against him.

The time passed quickly, the sun rose above the far-off strip of land that marked the eastern boundary of Currituck Sound, and beyond which lay the ocean.

When they heard a hail from the shore, and saw Ethan waving his red bandanna at them they knew it was time to go in. The flight had about finished for that morning although possibly they might have secured a few more shots at long intervals had they cared to remain in the blind.

"How many have we?" asked X-Ray, as Phil looked over the proceeds of the shoot, after having taken up the decoys and paddled to the shore of the cove, in order to retrieve any that were still floating on the water.

"Seven, all told," Phil replied. "Just one less than the other time, but plenty for all our wants, I should say."

"I'm to blame for that," declared X-Ray frankly; "I made some rotten bad shots, let me tell you, Phil."

"And a couple of as clever ones as I've ever seen," quickly responded the other, "which is the way duck shooting goes. Everybody looks back to the same experience, as far as I know. And it's those really good shots you're so proud of that keeps you from being downcast over the failures. If a man could hit with certainty every time he'd soon begin to lose all pleasure in the sport. Give the ducks a show for their money, X-Ray."

"They get it aplenty with me," said the novice; but nevertheless he was pleased in secret over those comforting words from his camp mate.

Of course there was considerable curiosity on the part of those in the camp to see what the hunters had accomplished, for they had heard frequent shots. And the talk at the breakfast table was pretty much all about ducks and their ways.

Ethan asked many questions, and had X-Ray explain how he managed. And once again did

Phil compliment his late companion on his work, with sincerity at that.

Indeed, somehow everybody seemed to have utterly forgotten about their little alarm of the night just passed; at least everybody save Phil, who was for developing that roll of film just as speedily as he could make a few more exposures, so as not to waste the balance of it.

As the morning was clear and bright he fancied it would be a good time to snap off some pictures of the group standing near the "shooting box"; and in doing this Malachi assisted, after being shown how to press the button when Phil had focussed the camera. That allowed Phil to pose alongside his chums, and brought the entire quartette of Mountain Boys into the picture.

When he had completed the six exposures Phil remarked that he would go inside and develop the roll. The others did not manifest any undue interest in the matter each being engaged with something that happened to strike him as worth while.

Lub was fussing over a little book in which he had written down some recipes given him by their cook at home, and which he was puzzled about, it seemed, for he could not exactly under-

stand the meaning of certain words he had employed.

There was Ethan pottering with the dinky, which he had drawn out of the water and turned over, so he could stop an aggravating little leak that bothered them.

X-Ray to be sure was just "trying a few on the half-shell," and keeping on at it so long that they began to tell him he would surely founder.

Malachi was using the ax to chop some more hickory wood, for they found that burned brightest in the evenings when they sat around the fire, and watched the flames jumping up hilariously.

Malachi would stop every little while and look uneasily toward the door of the cabin. Then he would smile just a little, shake his head and go on chopping. Whatever it was he had on his mind Malachi did not see fit to take any one into his confidence.

Finally Phil came out, and without saying a word to any one started to cleaning his gun. He was a careful hunter, and always kept his weapon in apple-pie condition, even using more or less vaseline inside the chambers when down on the shore near salt water, so as to prevent a speck of rust from starting.

The morning passed away.

Malachi continued to chop right along. When Phil offered to help him the young bay-man shook his head, and declared he was used to that sort of work; and indeed that he just felt like keeping it up that morning in particular.

When Phil walked away Malachi looked up after him; and had any one been close enough he might have discovered that same little whimsical smile creeping over the weather-beaten face.

Apparently Malachi was anticipating something to happen before a great while; and it may be he was hoping deep down in his heart that when the explosion *did* come it would pass him by without serious injury.

Lub finally made up his mind as to what his mystifying writing must have been intended to convey, for he bravely started in to concoct some sort of pudding for the midday meal. Ethan, who had been keeping a suspicious eye on him during the period of his meditations, now solemnly warned him as follows:

"See here, Lub, if you're in any doubt about the ingredients, or the quantity needed, please cut out all experiments. Why, I hope you don't think we're here for you to try your hand on, hit or miss? You might poison the

whole bunch of us. Make sure we'll see to it that you swallow a mess of your own stuff first. If it doesn't faize you then we might take a help, that is, if it looks good enough."

Lub, nothing daunted, continued his efforts, and from the fact that not one single scrap of that self-same pudding was left after lunch had been disposed of, it may be fairly believed the "mess" was pretty tasty, and also innocent of deadly germs.

Then later on some of the others happened to notice that Phil was once more doing some printing in the sun, for he had his frame busy. He never said a word, and as they understood that he would show them the results when he had finished the lot they paid little attention to him.

But again Malachi seemed unduly interested. He would watch Phil out of the corner of his eye, and every time the other peeped to see how a print was coming on, the young bayman might have been noticed holding his breath.

Once Malachi even sauntered over, and bent down to take a look at the printing frame, but of course he could see next to nothing that way.

The sun was bright but weak, so that it required considerable time to make six prints, for Phil seemed bent on getting them all.

Perhaps he may have saved the one in which he had the most interest to the last, for some reason of his own.

Ethan had come ashore, after trying the mended dinky, and incidentally raking up half a bushel of fine oysters. He happened to look toward the cabin just as Phil took up the printing frame, and turned the hinged back over to see how the sun was doing its work on the sensitized paper.

To Ethan's surprise he saw Phil spring to his feet as though suddenly connected with a galvanic battery. And plainly there came to his ears the exclamation that burst from Phil's lips, to wit:

"By George! now, if that doesn't beat the Dutch, I'll swallow my hat!"

CHAPTER XIV

WHEN THE AX SANG FOR JOY

BY that time X-Ray and Lub had come running out of the cabin, as though anxious to know why Phil was "making all that row."

"Got a dandy picture, did you, Phil; and do we all look like a lot of hoboes in camp?" demanded Lub, the very first thing.

"Oh! it isn't *that* picture," replied Phil, with a significant nod.

"Then it must be the flashlight one you got last night!" exclaimed Ethan at a hazard, with every one falling into line after him immediately.

"Let's see, Phil!" begged Lub.

"Was it a marsh pony, after all, or our bearish neighbor Simon Blodgett?" queried X-Ray.

"Gather around here," said the photographer, mysteriously, and they flocked to do as he said, even Malachi pressing up, to stretch his neck and gaze.

Phil waited until he could make sure that all of them were in position to see; then he delib-

erately turned the latest print over. The sun had done its work splendidly, and that flashlight cartridge had made an excellent exposure, for the print was clear and distinct.

No wonder Ethan and Lub and X-Ray stared, and then gave utterance to all manner of excited remarks.

"Great governor, it's Tillie!" cried Ethan, and as he had been over with Phil at the time the drink of water was begged, coming face to face with Blodgett's "darter," Ethan ought to know what he was talking about.

"But see there, who's that with her?" burst out Lub; "why, hang it, if he ain't got his arms around her, and she don't seem to care a switch, either! I say, what's this mean? Seems to me I ought to know that feller; look at his face turned this way, like Tillie's is, too!"

"It's—yes, I'll be hanged if it ain't—*Malachi!*" gasped X-Ray, straightening up, and turning to stare reproachfully toward the now grinning young bayman.

Phil was laughing as though immensely tickled.

"I want you all to know that I suspected something of this kind last night when I saw that Malachi was out of his bed the time of the alarm. None of the rest of you seemed to no-

tice that fact, for he came around later, when we were talking; but you did discover that Malachi was all dressed."

"Hey! pretty quick work, all right," said the astonished Lub, gazing more respectfully on Malachi, as though he began to believe the other must be a lightning wooer after all.

"Aw! shucks, he knew Tillie down below," commented X-Ray, quick to jump to conclusions, once he had a few points in his possession.

"That's right," added Ethan; "Malachi came from the Albemarle Sound shore, and like as not the Blodgetts did the same, because they don't belong up here."

Phil, smothering his laughter for the time being, turned on the young bayman.

"Malachi, you'll answer a question I want to ask, won't you?" he said, point-blank.

"I shore will, suh; you-all be'n mouty kind tuh me sence yuh helped me the night I was sick hyah. I'd be on'y too glad tuh tell yuh all I knows," came the reply.

"All right. Malachi, who is Tillie Blodgett?" continued Phil.

The other grinned still more, and then replied:

"They hain't no sech pusson as I knows on, suh, 'round these heah diggin's."

"Then what is that girl's name that you seem to have your arms around, Malachi?" and Phil knocked the sun print as he said this.

"I reckons, suh, tuh the best o' my knowledge she-all be Tillie Jorden!"

"Oh! and what relation is she to you, Malachi; not your sister?" continued Phil.

"She shore is my own *wife*, suh, thet's what!" came the staggering answer.

X-Ray gave a whoop, and started waving his hat around his head. Ethan, yes, and Lub in the bargain quickly joined in, so that for the brief space of a minute their cheers ascended in great volume. None of them had so much as dreamed of such an astonishing disclosure. And Phil realized that at last the puzzle concerning the sadness he had noticed about Malachi was in a fair way to be cleared up.

When the boys had given vent to their exuberant spirits sufficiently, and calmed down in a measure again, Phil once more spoke.

"Well, Malachi, this is pleasing to all of us, as you can see. We're glad to know you've got such a nice little wife; but can you let us hear what has happened to separate you from her so soon?"

Malachi was looking red in the face with embarrassment; at the same time his blue eyes

sparkled as none of the boys had ever seen them do; for it began to seem as though the dark skies were brightening for the young bayman. And this sympathy on the part of his new-found friends gave him great comfort.

"Glad tuh tell yuh all 'bout hit, suh," he started in bravely to say; "'caus yuh kin understand thet 'twas all *his* doin's," and he jerked his thumb in the direction of the shack that they knew lay some distance up the shore, and which was occupied by Simon Blodgett and Tillie, his "darter."

The story was only drawn from Malachi by dint of careful and persistent questioning on the part of Phil. Indeed, afterwards Ethan told his chief he would make a prize lawyer in time to come, judging from the clever way in which he managed to draw out the salient facts from one who did not know just how to express what he thought and felt.

It seemed then that Malachi had long known Tillie Blodgett, for they were near neighbors down on Albemarle Sound. The big man was, according to Malachi's notion of things, "rich"; that is he owned quite some property that would some day come to Tillie.

They had long been sweethearts, but when Malachi, who had been earning a rather pre-

carious living acting as guide occasionally, and possibly loafing more than was good for him, plucked up courage enough to beard the lion in his den, and ask the old man for his girl, he was turned down on the spot.

Blodgett gave him to understand no "gal" of his could marry a worthless "drifter," and that Malachi would have to mend his ways, and secure some permanent work before he could consent to their becoming "hitched," or even engaged.

Of course they refused to be separated, and met in secret many times. Then when a good chance came up they went to an itinerant minister, and were married, although the girl was not quite of age at the time.

They kept the secret for a while, but it leaked out at last, and Malachi shivered just in telling what a dreadful interview he had with Old Man Blodgett. He still had a scar on his head where he had struck the hard ground after his father-in-law had knocked him down.

And while Malachi was still confined to his bed from his injuries Old Man Blodgett had disappeared, nor did any one seem to know just whither he and Tillie had gone. He had left word behind that he would shoot Malachi on sight if he tried to follow; and that as the girl

was a minor at the time she became the wife of the young bayman, he meant to have the ceremony annulled.

Malachi, however, was made of better stuff than to hold back. Grimly determined to find and claim his wife he had started to track the old man. In course of time his pursuit had led him to the Currituck waters, with which he was somewhat familiar.

Then came that queer attack of "cramps," possibly brought about through eating tainted food taken from a can that had been opened on a previous day; and which was after all the luckiest "accident" that ever happened to Malachi, since it had thrown him into the company of the Mountain Boys.

He admitted that when he first learned Tillie was so near him, and with her terrible father as ready for trouble as ever, he had been greatly disturbed. The love he had in his heart for his wife had compelled him to determine to see her despite all opposition. So he had managed to get a few minutes conversation with her by watching the shack, and making sure the old man was away.

Tillie, just as fond of Malachi as ever, had agreed to steal out and meet him at a tryst, just as she used to do in the past. And it was while

they were sauntering along a path that without the slightest warning there came a dazzling white flash that startled them, and caused Malachi to cry out, under the impression he had been struck by a club in the hand of Old Man Blodgett.

All this and more came out by slow degrees. The boys were intensely interested in everything, and it did the heart of Malachi good to hear their hearty comments, and receive their best wishes.

Phil capped the climax when he made a definite offer.

"Make up your mind things are going to come out all right, Malachi," he declared in that convincing way of his, capable of carrying such weight; "the old man is already weakening with regard to us. You stick close to camp here, so he can't see you, and take the alarm. Leave the rest to me."

"I shore wud be on'y too glad tuh do thet, suh, I shore wud; but he's a hard man to argify with, I tells yuh. An' I 'pears tuh hit it wrong with Simon. Don't bear him no hard feelin's fo' strikin' me. Fust off I wanted tuh tackle him an' pay him back; but then I 'membered thet he sot a heap o' store by Tillie, 'case she's

all he's done got, an' I reckoned I cud stand hit."

"That shows you've got the right sort of a nature, Malachi," Phil remarked, "and now I'll tell you what's going to happen. After we get to being sort of neighborly, Old Man Blodgett and the rest of us, I'll find a chance to tell him about a place I've got here for a keeper and superintendent at a good round sum a year, to look after all the Putney property that was left to me. And Malachi, when he learns that *you* are holding that same steady job down, with this cabin to live in, ten chances to one he'll forgive you, and give you your wife again."

Malachi tried to say something, but the poor fellow was too much overcome. He just looked at Phil, with his blue eyes swimming in tears, and then turning rushed into the house, as though ashamed to let them see how weak he was when it concerned Tillie's happiness.

As for the other three boys they shook hands with Phil, and it was evident from the hearty grip each gave him that their feelings had been deeply stirred.

"That's the finest thing you ever did, Phil!" declared X-Ray, fervently.

"Oh! it doesn't amount to a great deal, and

besides I think I'm going to have my property down here taken care of in great shape, with as careful a man as Malachi to look after things, and such a nice girl as Tillie to look after him."

"You're the greatest fellow to want to make other people happy I ever knew," was Lub's verdict, as he beamed on Phil, and shook his hand as though it were a pump handle and he the milkman.

"Them's my sentiments!" boomed Ethan in turn.

"After all it's been one of the greatest little outings the Mountain Boys have ever known; and I think you'll all agree with me there," said Phil, who himself was feeling very happy because of the opportunity which had come to him to be of service to so good a fellow as Malachi; and the pretty Blodgett girl that was, now young Mrs. Jorden.

From what they could pick up nearly everybody seemed to be more or less in awe of the big bayman of the Albemarle Sound. Still, Malachi admitted that Simon had his good points, and that his only objections to him as a son-in-law had been his detestation of idlers.

But Malachi was now set upon proving to the old man that he could "make good," given a fair chance.

Again did Phil go out and fill the reservoir of that magical foot warmer, that on the cold morning had quite won Old Man Blodgett over. On the following morning they heard him shooting away, and what did Malachi do but tell them—having it from Tillie of course—that Simon was disposed to be philanthropical; for once a week he took his game and sent it to a certain city, where it was eagerly accepted at an orphan asylum.

“An’ Simon, he pays the tariff, too!” Malachi had ended up.

So even this bugbear of their having a “market-shooter” for a neighbor seemed destined to be cleared away, and the boys began to realize that Phil was about right when he warned them not to judge of any one too hastily.

Any man who would go to the trouble to send a mess of ducks weekly to an orphan asylum, and prepay the freight at that, could not be wholly bad, they concluded.

Malachi promised not to try to see Tillie again except while her father was out in the blind. A different Malachi worked around the camp now; even the strokes he gave with the ax seemed to possess a new vim and power; because his heart was swelling with happiness.

CHAPTER XV

PHIL'S MAGIC

THE day passed away without anything out of the common happening. Even Lub seemed to be making a new record, for somehow he managed to skip his customary run of accidents.

Phil had numerous conferences with his chums, and always when Malachi happened to be absent from the group. They talked matters over, and Phil laid his plans before the others for ratification.

"I rather look for Blodgett to break the ice soon, and make peace propositions," was what Phil announced.

"Why should he do that," asked the doubter, Ethan; "when, as we understand it his nature is that of a fighter, and he's never been known to hold back when there was a scrap in the air?"

"Well," replied Phil, "he's never been treated in the same way before, and it's taking his breath away, you see. That magical little toaster that I left in the blind so he could keep his toes com-

fortable while waiting for a flight, has had the effect of warming his heart in the bargain."

"I agree with you there," admitted Lub, confidently.

"It's shown him first of all that we are peacefully inclined, and that we want to be good neighbors, and not enemies," continued the other, impressively.

"Can you show me, Phil?" demanded Ethan; "I'm at the parting of the ways, and ready to throw up the sponge if you produce any tangible evidence."

"I'm hoping to be able to do that same, and perhaps to-day," he was told. "If not as soon as that, then to-morrow or the day after. But I'm dead sure it's going to come, sooner or later."

"All right, Phil; just give me a poke, will you, when it arrives. When I see that big bluffer extending the friendly hand to us I'll expect larks to drop from the clouds."

"Give me a little time, that's all I ask," Phil told him.

This conversation was not continued, because Malachi chanced to be with them pretty much all the time after that. But when Ethan, toward evening, started to follow Phil out of the cabin, and overtook him half-way to the dock,

he proved that he had not forgotten about it, by saying:

"As it's my turn with you in the blind to-morrow morning, Phil, I'm going to do my part helping to get ready. You looked after the foot-warmer to-day, didn't you? It's getting colder now, right along, and we'll find a good need for the same in that blind. And I'm hoping that Old Man Blodgett may show his hand before another sunset."

"You've got more than one reason for saying that last, haven't you, Ethan?" asked the other.

"Guess I have," replied the other boy, with a hearty laugh; "I'm wanting to see if you struck the right tune when you said it was going to come sooner or later. I'd like to study that old boy at closer range, because I warrant you he's a character, if ever there was one."

"Yes, and what else, Ethan?"

"Why, you see, this duck-shooting is all very well, but seems to me it can't hold a candle to knocking over geese, or a royal wild swan. And I'm bent on trying my hand at that sort while we're down here. We've got all the oysters we want; you fetched in a couple of terrapin yesterday that Malachi showed you how to find in the partly frozen mud; and we've had a mess

of fat quail; so that there's just one thing wanted to make my measure complete."

"Which is bigger game, in the way of a goose, eh?" Phil continued. "Well, I was talking it over with Malachi, and we've arranged for a trip to the outer bars on the day after to-morrow if the weather allows."

"Fine!" cried Ethan. "Can we all go along, Phil?"

"If Lub objects to staying alone here for the day we'll take him," the other explained. "It may be just as well, because we have a considerable distance to go, and something might happen to our engine, so that we'd be delayed over night. And Lub wouldn't enjoy being left to keep house, here alone all night long."

All preparations being completed the boys soon returned to the cabin, where they found Lub busily engaged in getting supper ready. Ethan beamed on him, for he realized that a good-natured chap like Lub was a blessing in any camp, always ready to put himself out for the sake of his chums, and counting no trouble too great if he could thereby serve those whom he loved.

Everything worked like a clock.

Phil awoke on time, and soon had Ethan up.

There was no need of arousing Malachi for hardly had Phil crept out of his bunk than he saw the young bayman sitting up on his cot, just as though he had been lying there waiting for the signal. And Malachi only too cheerfully took it upon himself to see after the fire, ditto the pot of steaming coffee that sent out a delicious aroma such as he had never before inhaled in all his life.

They were so quiet about the work that neither of the other boys gave the slightest evidence of having been awakened. And when the two early birds crept out of the cabin the conditions seemed pretty much the same as on previous mornings.

It was considerably colder, though, and the wind came from a direction closer to the northwest, having a bite in its breath that caused Ethan to draw the collar of his sweater further up on his neck.

Both lads were well fixed for sharp weather, since they wore corduroy caps that had ears attached which could be tied down so as to produce a comfortable sensation; the leather coats with sweaters underneath, and a paper vest in the bargain kept that chilling wind from getting at them; woolen mitts on their hands, and that splendid foot-warmer awaiting them in the blind

promised to mitigate the hardships that almost invariably accompany the rôle of a duck-shooter.

The same program was faithfully carried out, and before the dawn fairly came along, with a roseate flush in the eastern heavens, the expectant boys were cozily ensconced in the blind, the foot-warmer was at work, the decoys had been handily placed, and all that was required now was the flight of the moving ducks.

There is always some early bird astir, and the whistling of wings over the ruffled surface of the water gave the boys the thrill they were waiting for. While it happened that the first fowl did not head in toward their stools, the passage of the bird put them on the alert; and before long a trio of teal came sailing along with extended wings, eager to alight in the midst of such a seemingly happy party.

Not a single one of them flew away, for two figures suddenly arose back of that strange pile of brush on the point, and flashes of fire, accompanied by loud detonations, spelled the doom of the trusting teal.

"A good start, eh, Phil?" remarked Ethan, delighted because he had been able to bring down a brace of the birds with as many shots, and one of them quite a difficult one at that.

"We ought to have a good day of it," replied the other; "and I'd like to score a couple of dozen if only they came along fast enough."

"What's that you say?" remarked Ethan, as he snapped his gun shut after replacing the empty shells that had been ejected when he threw the mechanism open; "sounds a little like the pot-hunter way, Phil. I'm sure surprised at you."

"There are orphan asylums, you know," chuckled Phil; "and when you've got some good excuse like that for keeping up the shooting, my scruples sink out of sight."

"Oh! now I begin to get on to your little scheme," said Ethan.

"It would be a good excuse for looking him up, don't you think, if we had a nice bunch of ducks to offer him, to add to those he means to take down in a day or so, and ship, freight prepaid, to that institution?"

"Phil, you're a regular schemer," declared Ethan. "And I own up it sounds good to me."

"'Sh! there they come again!" hissed Phil.

"Bully! And that's a flock of bigger ducks, too!" whispered Ethan, with considerable excitement.

"Blacks!" was the only low comment the other made.

Quickly following there came the double report, followed by two more at speedy intervals.

"What did we get that time?" cried Ethan.

"Four dead, and one cripple! I'd like to lay him out if I could!" replied the other, who was trying to get a fresh shell into the breech of his gun at lightning speed; and just as he finished speaking he threw his gun up to his shoulder and fired at the swimming duck.

"Phil, you did it, as sure as anything!" cried Ethan, who could admire a good shot when another made it quite as readily as if he himself had pulled the trigger; "there he is lying on the water. One less cripple to suffer; and that makes nine for us already. Looks like a record to-day."

"Well, I told you this was orphan asylum day, didn't I?" laughed Phil. "But as to the shot, it's largely a matter of luck whether you get a cripple or not. Usually they dive before the shot reaches them, no matter how straight you aim. That chap was confused, and failed to go down fast enough."

The prediction that the day was going to be marked with a white stone in regard to more things than one was amply verified before long. The ducks seemed to take a great liking for that particular point that morning, for they con-

tinued to fly toward the decoys, and leave some of their number fluttering on the little wavelets when toll was taken by the two guns.

About the time the hunters sniffed coffee and bacon in the air the flight was over for the morning, and they were well content to rest on their well-won laurels.

"Have you kept tabs on the score?" asked Ethan. "According to my way of figuring we've nailed about seventeen in all, though possibly I'm one shy."

"I counted eighteen, with three cripples getting off, for which I'm sorry," Phil replied; "not that I'm hoggish, but I hate to think of them suffering, and perhaps falling victims to mink or foxes while they hide in the sedge grass of nights, close along the shore of the marshes."

Phil as usual was about to start to pick up the stools when Ethan begged to be allowed to do that job.

"I want to learn the whole thing, you see," he explained, "and next time we are out I'm going to insist on you letting me plant the stools."

"Just as you say," replied the other; who was secretly well pleased to find his comrade so anxious to master the whole matter of shooting from a shore blind.

"Look there in the cove; what do I see?"

gasped Ethan, just as he was about to start for the dinky to paddle off to the decoy bed, and gather them in.

"Yes, it's our neighbor, Old Man Blodgett!" said Phil, serenely, though he too must have experienced a thrill.

"But Phil, don't you see he's meaning to hook some of our game!" expostulated Ethan, anxiously. "He's got a stick, and is pulling a duck in right now. Yes, and he's made a little pyramid of nearly a dozen of our early birds on the beach."

"He's showing neighborly interest in our morning sport," Phil told him. "That's his way of edging up, and giving us a chance to break the ice. Now listen."

With that he elevated his voice, and called out cheerily:

"Good morning, Neighbor Blodgett!"

The big Tarheel bayman nodded his bushy head, and sang out in response, as though only waiting for such an opening to come along:

"Seems like yuh been havin' a bumper crop this mawnin', boys. I fished thirteen out so fur, an' thar's more acomin' I reckons. They's aflyin' right peart to-day, ain't they?"

Phil fetched Ethan a nudge in the ribs, just as much as to say: "well, what do you think now

of my scheme, you old doubter, eh? Didn't I size him up to a dot? And isn't the hatchet buried deep down under the soil?"

And Ethan in return gave a contented grunt, as though frankly admitting that the superior judgment of his chum had shown itself in plain evidence.

"We've certainly had a great morning shoot, neighbor," Phil called out, laying especial emphasis on that last winning word, because he knew how it was apt to affect this rough native, who knew what it meant to have a real neighbor. "And I've got something I want to talk over with you, Mr. Blodgett. Would you mind stepping over to my cabin, say in an hour from now? Fact is I want you to take the proceeds of our morning sport and add it to your contribution when you're sending the next lot of ducks to that orphan asylum. You'll come over, won't you, please?"

Old Man Blodgett stood there like a statue. So they knew what he was doing on the sly, did they; of course he had no idea how the information had leaked out; but it was nothing to be ashamed of, and somehow the generous offer which these boys had made to join with him in his good work carried the heart of the big man by storm. He surrendered unconditionally.

After that there could be no more ill feeling shown between them; yes, they must be neighborly.

"I shore will accept of that same invite, son!" he called out; "and if yuh could see what joy them pore orphings git from the little I kin send tuh 'em ye'd never begrudge 'em a duck er two. Hit's fine o' yuh tuh promise thet. I'll drap 'round in a hour er so, sure I will."

"We'll have the morning's shoot ready to hand over to you, Mr. Blodgett," continued Phil; "and oh! by the way, will you fetch your daughter with you, please? You see, we haven't got any womankind along, and I'd like to get her opinion about something we have there that I know she'd like very much to see. Say you will, Mr. Blodgett."

The old man hesitated. He doubtless was puzzled to account for this expressed wish on the part of the boy. But so long as he was with Tillie he evidently could not see how it could do any harm. And besides, that happy little incident of Phil offering him the fine bunch of ducks had rather taken away his breath.

"Oh! all right, son, I'll fetch my darter along; like as not Tillie kin help yuh out sum ways. An' she's allers wanted tuh see what the inside o' thet cabin looked like. If I thought tuh stay

up heah on this new ground o' mine I calkerlated puttin' up a shack as like it as two peas. In er-bout an hour, then."

With that he turned and strode away, as harmless apparently as though his talons had been drawn; and Ethan's first act was to wring the hand of his chum, and say:

"Phil, you're a magician, sure you are; I believe you could tame a tiger if you tried."

CHAPTER XVI

THE GREAT SURPRISE—CONCLUSION

BREAKFAST was well over.

Somehow Phil and Ethan seemed bent on hurrying things along, this morning, so that all hands set about getting the dishes out of the way, and the interior of the cabin tidied up.

"Act like you might be expecting visitors," grumbled Lub, who was almost out of breath with hurrying, after eating such a tremendous breakfast, and preparing the major part of the same, too.

Phil gave him a wink and a nod.

"Perhaps we do, Lub," he whispered, "but don't mention it to any one, please."

When Ethan a little later on reported that the neighbors were coming, Phil turned to Malachi, who had gone a little white with apprehension and expectation.

"You stay inside the cabin until you hear us call you," he said, impressively; "and if that comes about you'll know what to do next, Malachi. Here's luck to you."

So Phil, followed by the other three boys strode forth to welcome Old Man Blodgett and his "darter." Tillie looked prettier than ever; all the boys were of the opinion. There was considerably more color in her plump cheeks, and her eyes had a sparkle in them as she looked inquiringly at Phil.

"She just guesses there's something up," whispered Ethan, on the sly, in the ear of Phil; "when the old man told her how you wanted her to come over along with him Tillie smelled a rat. Gee! I don't blame Malachi one bit, she is a peach, sure enough."

The ducks, eighteen of them, had been arranged in a row, and they made a noble showing, some being teal and others of a larger variety. If canvasbacks and redheads were lacking that morning, surely the little hungry orphans would not know any difference; a duck was a duck with them every day in the week; and the only trouble was that they seldom saw one on their table year in and year out, until Old Man Blodgett took the notion to remember them.

"Here's our contribution to your mess, Mr. Blodgett," said Phil, as he waved a hand toward the spoils. "I wish for the sake of your orphans that it was twice as big a pile; but that ought to help out some, don't you think?"

"It shore will, son," replied the big man, warmly, as he held out his hand to Phil; and already Lub and Ethan and X-Ray Tyson had decided that when he chose to smile Old Man Blodgett was rather an amiable sort of a giant after all. "Interduce me tuh the rest o' the crowd. This hyah is Tillie; she's my darter, yuh know."

The introduction took scant time, and each of the other boys was given a grip that made their bones ache. Tillie, too, was ready to meet them half way, for of course she knew that they had befriended her Malachi, and on that account she could feel warmly toward the four chums.

Of course it was up to Old Man Blodgett to take a cursory glance around, just as though he might be seeing things for the first time; when truth to tell the trail that led from the shack to the Putney spring—and doubtless to the oyster beds as well—told of numerous friendly visits from the neighbors when there was no occupant of the cabin to be offended.

"Seems like yuh gotter a putty fine place o' hit heah, son!" Old Man Blodgett went on to say, as though he considered that the most convenient method of displaying neighborly interest.

"It's a plantation that they tell me used to be

very valuable, and can be easily made so again," said Phil. "I've decided to go in for oyster planting on an extensive scale; as well as starting a terrapin farm. What would you think of such enterprises, Mr. Blodgett?"

"Both on 'em orter be big successes," declared the visitor, with a sagacious nod of his massive head. "Shows thet yuh hev a level head about yuh, son. And if so be yuh gotter plenty o' cash tuh stand the outlay at fust, ther orter be a good harvest arter the fust year er so. If I war younger, an' needed more money, I'd be tempted tuh offer tuh go in with yuh, shore I would."

"I'm glad you think so," said Phil, looking pleased.

"Hit all depends on whether yuh kin git the right sorter man tuh take charge o' things heah, son," pursued the other, reflectively. "He orter know all 'bout oysters an' terrapin, ther ways, and how tuh raise 'em successfully."

"That's just what I thought, Mr. Blodgett," said Phil, believing that the time was now ripe to strike while the iron was hot. "I've signed a contract with a party to act as manager of my property for *three years*, at a good round salary. He'll live in this cabin here, and we're going to try and make it as comfortable for him as we

can. So you see, he's bound to be a neighbor of yours, Mr. Blodgett."

The big man stroked his bearded chin as though debating something.

"His this heah manager o' yourn a married man, I'd like to ask, son?" he finally demanded.

"Oh! yes, I believe he is," Phil replied, without the shadow of a smile.

"Then in co's his wife'd live heah with him?" mused the other.

"That's what we hope, Mr. Blodgett; and you can see they'd be pretty comfortable, taken in all."

"Reckons they would, son, they shore would," agreed the big man, as his eyes again roved over the neat exterior of the cabin; and in imagination he could doubtless see what the interior must be like to correspond with the rest.

"By the way, Mr. Blodgett," continued Phil, giving his mates a quick look as if to tell them to get ready for the explosion, "it happens that the new manager of the Putney property is in our camp right now; I'll call him out, and let you get acquainted."

With that Phil stepped to the door, and beckoned to the young bayman, who had, it can be readily understood, been listening and peeping

all this while, with his heart threatening to choke him by jumping up into his throat.

They all expected to see Old Man Blodgett give a tremendous start, and perhaps frown terribly. To their amazement he even grinned affably, and sang out:

"Hello! thar, son-in-law Malachi! On deck be yuh? Wall, heah's Tillie," and as he uttered these astounding words Old Man Blodgett gave the frightened girl a little shove toward the young bayman, who promptly threw a pair of lusty arms around her, though almost dumfounded at the way things had turned out.

"Why, what does this mean, Mr. Blodgett?" demanded Phil, very much taken aback, but delighted beyond measure at the same time; "we thought we were going to give you the surprise of your life, when it seems you've turned the tables. How did you know Malachi was with us?"

The giant grinned still more.

"Aw! Tillie, she done talked in her sleep last night," he explained, "an' so I l'arned all 'bout the game. But I've found out, son, thet it hain't no use atryin' tuh keep them two young fools apart, 'case Tillie, she's mopin' all ther time. And since Malachi he's gone an' found hisself

seeh a nice berth with you-uns heah, I jest naturally made up my mind I'd let by-gones be by-gones. Tillie's a good gal; an' I've jest got tuh let Malachi hev her. But he knows what'll happen tuh him if ever he treats my darter mean."

He even walked over and shook hands with the happy young bayman; and of course Tillie promptly smothered him with kisses. Ethan thought she looked prettier than ever about that time, and he rather envied Old Man Blodgett.

Of course after that it was all plain sailing. They entered the cabin, and Malachi showed all its conveniences, as well as explained what wonderful improvements he had been told to institute by the young owner. And Tillie, who had possibly never lived in anything but an ordinary shore cabin in all her life, even if her father was reckoned a rich man, Tillie, being a woman, took the keenest interest in everything Malachi enumerated.

It was finally arranged that the young couple should go to housekeeping after the Mountain Boys had started North again. Until that time arrived things could go on as they had been doing; only Malachi need no longer sneak around to the rear of the Blodgett shack, and give a low signal for his wife to meet him on the sly, but

could walk boldly to the door and step in, if he chose.

As this interesting puzzle had been solved, it was to be hoped for all time, and two fond hearts united, the boys turned their attention to getting as much enjoyment out of their visit as was possible.

Lub concluded that he did not really care to start off across the bay by starlight, in order to hide on a point, where there was a bar frequented by wild geese. Since Old Man Blodgett and Tillie would be close by, Lub said that he did not mind if the others did remain away all night, as he would feel that he had company, and in fact he could invite the neighbors to join him at suppertime.

After talking it over the plan was finally changed. Malachi explained that it would be much better if they could get across by afternoon, and in this way fix some sort of a blind on the goose point overlooking the bar, in case there was no pit dug there.

As it turned out, they found a hole that had undoubtedly been used earlier in the season by some sportsman. It gave the three boys a chance to conceal themselves. As for Malachi, since he knew how to run a gasoline motor his

was to be the business of picking up any floating game they might manage to shoot.

Fortune was good to Phil and his chums, for as it happened, while Ethan and X-Ray Tyson bagged a fine big goose apiece Phil himself had the luck to get a wild swan, something he had never been successful in securing before.

A week had now flown, and half of the time they had set for their stay expired; but the boys were all more than satisfied with the wonderful experiences that had come their way. Besides, every time they looked at the happy beaming faces of Malachi and Tillie they felt like shaking hands with themselves, because they had been instrumental in bringing about this delightful conclusion of the unfortunate affair.

At last the morning came when the Mountain Boys had to say good-by to the shooting box where they had had such a royal good time.

Malachi hated to see them go the worst kind. They had come into his life when he was sick, and in great trouble; and somehow from that moment his fortunes began to mend.

Even Old Man Blodgett, who meant to start South in a day or so to return to his home place down below, beamed on Phil and his friends, and gave them to understand that he would never cease to rejoice over the fact that those

fine boys had come into his life and that of his "darter," Tillie.

"And jest as sure as I uses thet smart contraption yuh guv me, Mr. Phil, fo' warmin' the feet o' a duck-shooter in a blind, I shore has tuh think o' yuh. Come down again next season, all on yuh, an' see us. Yuh'll shore be as welcome as ther flowers in spring."

As the launch went noisily on its way the Mountain Boys gave a cheer for those they had left behind; and whose memory would be kept green through the pictures which were intended to embellish the album Phil had started.

So ended their little journey to the Coast country, to try out Phil's shooting box on Currituck Sound; they had certainly had a glorious time, and could feel satisfied with their trip; but Phil had still another experience in view, which the enforced vacation at Brewster gave them a chance to carry out. What that scheme embraced, and what further strange adventures came the way of our four young friends can be found narrated between the covers of the next volume in this Series, called "Phil Bradley's Snow-shoe Trail; or, The Mountain Boys in Canadian Wilds."

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